

The Leviathan of the Covenant

明血約の リヴァイアサ

丈月城
Takeduki Joe
illust: 仁村有志



MF文庫



The Leviathan of the Covenant

明血約の リヴァ イア サン

丈月城

illust: 仁村有志

Takeduki
Joe



「気づいているか、小僧？
おまえは今、悪魔に逢っているのだぞ」

Himokagutsuchi
火之迦具土
竜族から
“女王”と呼ばれる、
謎の少女。

Orihime Jiyouchi
十條地織姫
《魔女》候補の
お嬢様。晴臣に
興味を持つ。

「い、言うにことかいて
ケダモノとか獣とか怪物とか！
晴臣は、花の乙女を
何だと思っているのですか!？」

Asya
アーシャ
晴臣の幼なじみで、
欧州屈指の《魔女》。
大食い。

「なあアーシャ。
君、前に食用の菊が何かを
むさぼり喰ってなかったか？」

Haruomi Haruga
春賀晴臣
研究機関《S.A.U.R.U.》に
所属する少年。盟約儀式の
プロデュースを
生業とする。

オレンジ色の西日が差しこむ廃墟のなか。

美の女神もかくやと言いたくなるほど、
みことな肢体の少女がたたずんでいた。

「春賀くん……
すごいまじめそうな顔
してるけど、微妙に
目がぎらついてない？」

「いや、ほら。僕も
健全な高校生男子だし」

「そ、そこはウソでも
ごまかすところどころでございっす！」



「古き清浄の御印に
願い奉る！」

唱えるのは召喚の歌。
相棒『蒼きルサルカ』を
呼ぶための聖句。

「かりそめの蒼き雌竜を
地上に遣わしたまえ！
浄化の星を
われらの
頭上に！」



Prologue

Haruga Haruomi's earliest memory was that of a "dragon."

A dragon soaring through the sky.

Its reptilian head, torso and limbs resembled those of lizards.

A snake for a tail. The pair of outspread wings resembled those of bats. Its scales were the color of steel.

The dragon leisurely stretched out its great wings and flew in the blue sky. With a body length of roughly six or seven meters, this should be quite a typical size for a lesser dragon.

—This was the earliest memory carved in the heart and mind of young Haruga Haruomi, aka Hal.

It was also one of the few memories he could recall from early childhood. But apart from Hal, there were probably many other boys and girls with similar memories.

The *return* of the dragons had taken place more than twenty years ago.

For those born in the ensuing generation, dragons were nothing rare. But no matter how much time passed, this type of creature still remained impressive as ever.

Be that as it may, Hal's life had always been intimately involved with these transcendent creatures.

Back when he was still a young child, Hal was already frequently playing on his father's notebook computer.

Behind the back of the father who was always immersed in his "work" materials—poring over piles of old and dust-laden books, intently reading some sort of literature—Hal was always playing on the computer by himself. He would occupy his time by visiting video websites over the internet.

All of the videos bookmarked by his father were related to dragons.

The Day Dragons Returned: depicting the spectacle of dragons awakening from the deep sea where mankind had never ventured, taking to the skies and sweeping across the entire world. *Dragons Strike for the First Time*: the returning dragons took decisive action and launched aerial assaults against all nations.

Most classic of all was *Here Comes HANNIBAL the Red Dragon!*

This was live footage of a dragon—the self-styled "King of Dragons"—that had flown to New York's Rockefeller Center and delivered a speech in perfect English(!) to propose a draft policy regarding "orderly coexistence between dragonkind and earthlings"—

Hal had grown up surrounded by this type of information.

But most frequently of all, young Hal mainly watched Japanese animation and television dramas.

His father was often traveling all over the world on "business trips." Due to frequently living in various countries, the internet became one of their few connections to their homeland of Japan.

Hal's nickname naturally arose during this period.

Even in contemporary Japan, old-fashioned names like "Haruga Haruomi" had become quite rare.

Foreigners capable of pronouncing it properly were virtually nonexistent. They all preferred to call him "Hal" directly.

As a side note, Hal once asked his father whether the double-"Haru" alliteration was intentional. His father ended up replying instantly with a completely serious expression, saying that "toying with their child's name is one of the few privileges enjoyed by parents."

This was the kind of father he grew up with, just the two of them.

No sooner had they stayed in Indonesia's Jakarta for six months when they immediately went to live in Romania's Braşov for a year. Then after stopping at the Kamchatka Peninsula for four months, they moved to Tskhinvali in

Georgia. This time, they stayed relatively longer, for two years—This was the kind of vagabond lifestyle that Hal had always lived.

However, when Hal was twelve years old...

After a long absence, he and his father finally returned to Tokyo *New Town* to live at "their own home."

Unlike the past, the reason for their stay was not "work."

His father had fallen critically ill. In order to nurse his illness, the two of them had returned to Hal's birthplace. However, this period of life ended rather quickly.

Unable to recover from the severe illness, Hal's father passed away six months after returning to Tokyo.

Consequently, Hal became an orphan at the tender age of twelve.

Nevertheless, Hal abandoned the options of turning to distant relatives or orphanages for help, instead deciding to resume his vagabond lifestyle.

By this point, adjusting himself to settled life and cohabitation would be more of a bothersome challenge instead.

The inheritance from his father proved to be handy on this occasion.

But instead of money, it was knowledge. Thanks to staying by his father's side throughout the years, Hal understood his father's "work" very well. Hence he decided to inherit the family business.

Due to the uniqueness of the profession, Hal's young age fortunately did not pose any problems.

Like his father, Hal "worked" in various countries for a few years—

Then just as he was about to turn sixteen, Hal was confronted with a dilemma. Due to a certain reason, he was compelled to return to his homeland of Tokyo.

Chapter 1 – To the Homeland Where There Are Dragons

Part 1

It all started two months earlier.

Back then, the calendar read February.

That would be midwinter—Well, only inhabitants of the northern hemisphere would jump to that conclusion. At the time, Hal was actually in Australia on the southern hemisphere, and at a little coastal town to boot.

With summer in full swing, the sky overhead was blue and distant while the clouds were so white that they were dazzling.

Although the sunlight was quite intense, it added further to the liberating feeling of summer.

There was also the sea. A beautiful sea, navy blue and crystal clear, together with a white beach.

This was a town where one could take a quick walk to the shore and fully enjoy summer. Even if meant as flattery, calling this area metropolitan would be quite a stretch. However, it was not sparsely populated to the point that one would begin to miss urban life.

Tranquility in moderation. Comfort in moderation.

Hal's purpose here was work.

—Flying in from the moon and satellite orbits, the frequency of recent dragon attacks on urban areas had almost reached the level of sudden natural disasters.

As a safety precaution, local administrations in developed nations had written up tremendously detailed emergency evacuation manuals.

Furthermore, rigorous simulation drills were held at regular intervals to ensure flawless execution of evacuation procedures. This had already become the norm.

Apart from that, further self-defense measures would be desirable.

However, there were no military installations near this little town. In addition, despite being a coastal area, there were limitations in relying on the patrolling fleets of the TPDO—the Trans-Pacific Defense Organization.

Hence, it was commonplace for people to desire "assurance" unhindered by these conditions.

Hal worked for an organization whose main business was selling "knowledge" to these people.

Back when he first arrived here at the organization's referral, the southern hemisphere was still in winter.

During this period before the arrival of summer, Hal rushed all over Australia like the world-famous archaeologist and grave robber, Indiana Jones, and finally completed his mission. Having handed the obtained Grave Goods to local bigshots, he was freed from his task.

He did not know if the ladies selected as eligible candidates would succeed in becoming witches known as "magi."

However, that did not fall under Hal's jurisdiction.

In the short term, all he needed to do was recuperate and enjoy this leisurely vacation without restraint.

Hence, he first went to a cafe by the sea. In the middle of slurping his mixed fruit juice, Hal received an incoming phone call that would disrupt all his plans.

"...Asya."

The touchscreen-operated portable terminal displayed the caller's name.

Anastasya Rubashvili.

Born in Georgia. Nicknamed Asya. Childhood friend. An unfortunate but inseparable relationship. For Hal, who did not have many friends, she was a rare case of a long-term friendship he maintained.

Touching the LCD, Hal picked up the call.

'It's been a while, Haruomi. How have you been, lately?'

The childhood friend's voice was both lovely and gentle.

In fact, she was also blessed with natural beauty that offered a perfect match for her voice.

But for some unknown reason, Hal found it extremely challenging to treat her as a member of the opposite gender. Maybe it was because he had often witnessed the way she wolfed down two-kilogram steaks while claiming "I'm lacking in appetite today" before finishing off another three plates of Korean-barbecued beef ribs.

In any case, to the childhood friend whose dreamy appearance only ran skin deep, Hal replied: "Good enough, I suppose. After all, I just finished a job."

'That's really good news. Well then, I happen to have a request fo—'

Beep. Hal disconnected the call.

Rather than a carefully thought-out action, this was a reflexive impulse.

'Could you please explain why you suddenly hung up?'

Calling again, Asya's voice still sounded adorable but now there was also something terrifying about it.

"Sorry. I couldn't help myself because you're like the monster that's trampling my paradise."

'That does not constitute a valid reason. And please avoid describing a young maiden as some kind of monster.'

"Then let me break this to you... As I've already mentioned before, my dream is to save up enough money to retire in seclusion at a quiet little town somewhere."

A light sigh was emitted on the other side in response to Hal.

'...Oh that one. If my memory serves me right, your target is to achieve your dream before the age of thirty-five, isn't it?'

"Yes. Then I'll spend the rest of my life freely indulging myself in my interests without doing any work at all."

'For a teenage boy's ambitions, that's severely lacking in the dream department.'

"Does it? On the other hand, I believe that as far as life's planning goes, there's nothing more dream-like than this. If you ask some pedestrians on the street, I'm sure many people will support the notion."

'Many people may agree, but I'm quite sure not many teenagers will be among them.'

Rather than caustic, Asya's tone of voice was indifferent.

She seemed to have had enough. However, Hal remained unfazed and continued, "In any case, that's my dream. My current location is quite ideal. This town offers just the right level of tranquility, it's comfortable to live in and has good proximity to the sea."

'By ideal, you really mean...'

"Yes. As a secluded residence, I think this place is completely flawless. Asya, I just finished a job and am now in a place where I can fulfill my dream. Wouldn't you agree that it'd be a most natural development if I want to take a vacation and have a trial run of my future while I'm here?"

'Speaking of which, it happens to be summer over on your side right now...'

"And yet you call at a time like this to discuss a 'request.' In any case, I'm sure it must be work related? That's why I hung up. In order to stop a certain insensitive monster from invading the sanctity of my paradise..."

'Please do not use a word like 'sanctity' to describe an excuse for slacking off.'

"I want to spend my time here lazing about like some sort of slovenly creature. Please find someone else."

'I refuse.'

The two sides had no common ground.

In order to overcome the impasse, Asya began to explain tirelessly.

'There's some personal research I'd like to conduct, so I plan to go to Tokyo New Town soon and use that place as a temporary base of operations.'

"Research, you say? And you deliberately go all the way to New Town?"

'Yes. However, I'm not too familiar with that city. I've also heard that SAURU does not have much staff there who could provide assistance.'

Hal and Asya both belonged to the research organization SAURU.

Undertaking the revival and research of the Metaphysical Body of Knowledge for resisting dragons, their mission was to promote this to the entire world—A secret association.

"The current Tokyo is nothing more than a regional city. I believe it has fallen into a deep recession, so having large numbers of staff stationed there is pointless," said Hal indifferently.

After the "Dragons' Return" and First Strike event over twenty years ago, the humans were forced into an unequal treaty, resulting in the establishment of over two hundred "concession" territories ceded to dragonkind.

The Tokyo Concession was one of them.

Currently, all the capital functions had been moved to central Japan.

'However, it would make a huge difference just by having one trustworthy companion by my side... Haruomi, you were born there, am I right? I also seem to remember you mentioning that you have a home there. So I wanted to discuss—'

"I haven't gone back for three years already. Neither do I have any intention to do so now," Hal swiftly rejected Asya before she could finish.

'Could you compromise a little on that point? Think of it as helping your childhood friend.'

"Friends are best kept out of sight, in one's heart."

'...Heartless.'

"I don't mind if you call me a fiend."

'Then I won't hold back. Fiend, demon! You are totally human scum, the worst lowlife!'

"Hearing that from a young girl gets me a little excited."

'You're a total pervert as well!?''

".....Heh."

'P-Please at least pretend to deny that last allegation!'

After grumbling at Hal's chuckling, Asya coughed and cleared her throat.

'In that case, Haruomi, let us have a chat about old memories. Do you still remember the time when we went to town by ourselves and ended up getting lost?'

"I seem to remember you were leading the way and took a wrong turn?"

'If anything, it was your fault for losing the map, Haruomi. Anyway, we were wandering about town back then, our stomachs rumbling with hunger.'

"Right, that's why I suggested: 'Given how cute a girl you are, Asya, all you need to do is plead tearfully and some benevolent adult or dirty pedophile will surely treat us to a meal, why not give it a shot?'"

'That's right, you said that... When clearly that kind of beggar-like behavior is totally unacceptable.'

"Rather than beggar-like, it's truly authentic begging."

'That's even worse! Putting that aside, back to the subject... Back then, by spending the little money I had to buy a hamburger, I was rendered penniless. Yet I divided my precious food and shared half with you to alleviate your hunger.'

"Hold it right there. From what I remember, your share was a lot more than half, you know?"

'W-Whatever. Anyway, roughly a half, okay!'

"Judging from your arguing, you're really doing this on purpose."

'...Please cast away those suspicions that are tainting our wonderful reminiscence. In any case, you understand now? After that, the bond we've built up has become our shared treasure. In order to respect that bond, shouldn't we support each other through good times and bad?'

"I think that reason's really stretching it."

'I don't care. Back then, you took away half of my food, Haruomi, so it's not fair unless you repay me accordingly!'

"...If I remember correctly, we were in Luxembourg back then?"

Hal attempted to recall the price level and local currency value from that time.

"A hamburger, right? Probably costed less than two Euros..."

'What's important is the benevolence of sharing roughly half of one's possessions with another. It's not very manly of you to calculate the value of a favor in terms of money.'

The above conversation led Hal to return to his homeland of Tokyo.

Despite going on a massive tangent filled with nonsense, Anastasya Rubashvili, aka Asya, was indeed Haruga Haruomi's old friend.

To be honest, Hal's true thoughts were "By this point, why bother going to a place like Tokyo..."

He had not returned all this time. Furthermore, despite being his homeland, there was no one waiting for him back there. There was no need to confirm this fact deliberately—That was what Hal believed.

However, his long and deep friendship with Asya prevented him from rejecting with that kind of reason.

Hal could only shrug and go "good grief" in resignation.

Hence, his vacation was cut short after lasting a mere three days. Hal started preparing for his return to Tokyo New Town.

Part 2

Time flew.

On the verge of returning to his homeland, Hal had no choice but to finish handling a mountain of paperwork.

First of all, he contacted the Japanese headquarters of SAURU, the organization he belonged to.

"So that's how it happened. Although it's not my original intention, I have finally decided to visit my hometown."

'Oh dear, your long phase of living away from home is finally drawing to an end, eh?'

Making an international call from Australia, Hal explained the situation and reported his plans to return.

On the other end of the line was a woman called Hiiragi-san. Her voice sounded gentle and elegant over the phone. Hal could not help but describe her voice as noble.

She was the leader in charge of SAURU's Japanese branch in the Kantou region.

'Considering it's you, Haruomi, who refused to return no matter how much I tried to persuade you... This somehow makes me deeply moved.'

"I didn't run away from home. I'm simply making a living overseas."

'At your age, there are definitely plenty of alternatives to your pelagic fisherman-kind of lifestyle, aren't there? There's plenty of work in Tokyo too. You must have heard about the shortage of talent around here.'

"Yes, primarily from you, Hiiragi-san."

The speaker on the other side was Hiiragi-san, a member of the organization's core leadership.

Part of her duties involved referring jobs to SAURU members such as Haru and Asya. After receiving "requests" from civilian or state agencies in her area

of jurisdiction, she would assign them to suitable members according to what the jobs entailed.

"The lack of manpower is such a pain, so I hope you can help out in handling all the odd jobs and menial tasks. I'll order you around and make full use of you, so hurry back, will you?' —That's what you actually mean, right?"

'...Hold on, I should've expressed it far more tactfully than that, right?'

"You even resorted to tears once."

'My acting skills were clearly perfect that time... But you still remained unmoved, Haruomi.'

"Because the timing in the transition from your original subject of conversation to the outpour of tears was a teeny bit unnatural."

'Getting duped willingly is a show of manliness in times like those, you know♪ Oh right, before I forget it,' the crafty organization leader suddenly changed the subject.

'I've already introduced you to a high school that's on good terms with our organization, so you must attend school normally.'

"High school!?"

'Of course. After all, you're an age where you normally go to high school to begin with.'

"I've totally forgotten about that."

'Forgotten on purpose, you mean? Don't just focus exclusively on being a treasure hunter. At least earn the high school credits you're supposed to have.'

"I'm not good at that kind of stuff. After all, I won't be making friends."

Hal's talent was in searching for the antiques known as Grave Goods.

Technically speaking, they should be called "magical apparati for enshrined object emulation."

Due to being too long and unwieldy, the official term naturally fell into disuse. Instead, the colloquial name, slightly lacking in dignity, found widespread use.

These were the objects that Hal would obtain by excavating, stealing and extracting from ancient ruins and historical sanctuaries, or by acquiring them from black markets where artwork and antiques circulated.

This was why Hiiragi-san called him a "treasure hunter."

Hal was not the only one talented in this line of work. It had been his father's specialty as well.

For the sake of securing whatever caught their eyes, the father and son would go as far as to run all over the world. Hal had been transferring between schools constantly on a global range.

Hence, his sense of belonging in the institution called school was rather weak.

'Don't give up before you start... But it's true that you're definitely a child who completely fails at reading cues, Haruomi. Even when there are hungry bears prowling nearby, I get the feeling that you'd still lightheartedly start a barbecue.'

"Rather than failing to read cues, I notice but deliberately ignore them."

'In other words, the problem lies not in sensitivity but sociability? Perfect. Then take this opportunity in the closed environment of a school to learn properly how to live in society.'

With this troublesome mission imposed on him, Hal finally returned to his home country.

The Tokyo New Town Special Economic Zone was formed by redeveloping the former administrative regions including the Tokyo wards of Kōtō and Edogawa, stretching all the way to the wards of Adachi and Katsushika as well as the southeastern part of Saitama Prefecture.

The Haruga home was situated in the Sumida Ward inside this zone.

It had originally been a grand residence designed in the image of a European mansion.

But perhaps due to being uninhabited for long periods of time, the house was no different from a derelict building. The garden was completely neglected as

well. As much as the house remained intact, it had become something like a ghost mansion.

Hal cleaned up the house to a level livable for a single male, at least.

First, he made a rough sweep of the dust accumulated over the long years, doing some vacuum cleaning, cutting corners to a degree that would cause any neat freak to frown. Then he ventilated the interior and took out a simple bed to set up in the study—That was all.

Honestly speaking, it really was a sloppy clean up job...

"I've never returned to this home since Pops passed away," muttered Hal softly while looking at the study that had become his castle.

The sort-of magnificent bookshelves were fully occupied by the book collection of the Haruga family, a lineage said to have produced many a collector over the generations, although only few of them were from his father. Despite having read tens of thousands of volumes, he tended to digitize the majority of books after reading.

This naturally arose from a lifestyle of frequent relocations.

"Oh, so that's where Pops kept it."

Inside the study was a heavy desk. Opening a drawer, Hal discovered *it*.

A silver pocket watch. Hal had some recollections of it. During the last years of his life, his father often kept it by his side, staring at it with deep emotion. As a side note, this was no ordinary watch.

It was one of his father's tools of the trade, a "clockwork mage."

Having inherited the family business, Hal also treasured the same type of tool.

"This thing is really good, just as I thought. And you clearly said you'd give it to me once you're done with it..."

The silver watch was circular with a diameter of 10cm.

It was slightly too large as a pocket watch, but Hal still stuffed it into a pocket in his pants.

Even higher in quality than the one Hal was currently using, this thing was definitely going to come in handy in the future. However, Hal could not deny the fact that he was partially motivated by a desire to carry a memento...

Then Hal spread out some documents on the desk.

These documents were required by the school introduced by Hiiragi-san and had to be filled in properly. After doing that, he would also need to visit SAURU's one and only branch office in New Town to greet his contact there...

With a whole ton of necessary tasks to complete, Hal was quite occupied for days on end.

During this time, Asya finally arrived in Japan as well.

By the time that Hal had finished most of preparations for his new life, it was already April.

April meant the start of the Japanese school year--Having forgotten this kind of basic fact, Hal hastily changed into his uniform, grabbed his schoolbag and rushed out of the house on the morning of the opening ceremony.

Opening ceremony. New student orientation. Introduction to clubs. Official start to lessons. Etc.

After experiencing a first week packed with events, Hal's high school life entered its second week.

Kogetsu Private Academy. Year 1 Class F in the high school division.

Hal's seat was in the last row, next to the window. Sitting there motionless like a Japanese house spirit, he silently surveyed the classroom without conversing with anyone.

Lessons were over and it was currently after school.

Friendships within the class seemed to be establishing themselves smoothly.

Several cliques had already formed among the boys and girls. Staying in the classroom, they would either chat together or horse around, looking like they were developing amicable relations.

However, Hal was alone by himself.

This resulted from how passive he had been in approaching classmates ever since the start of the school term.

"Isn't this within expectations too?" Hal whispered to himself.

Ordinary people might feel uncomfortable in his situation, but Hal was completely unfazed. After all, his personality was not endearing at all, to the point that he would not be deterred by concerns regarding public image.

Today, he had agreed to help Asya out after school was over.

But just now, he received a text message from her saying that something had come up and she would be late.

Thus Hal was leisurely hanging around in the classroom.

While Asya was handling whatever she needed to do, he needed to kill time—

"Hi, you're... Haruga-kun, right?"

Someone suddenly spoke to Hal. The girl sat in front to his right.

Sporting short hair amenable to an active lifestyle, she looked rather cute.

"Are you free today? If it's okay with you, could you accompany me for a bit?"

"Sorry, I'm not free so I must decline."

The chance to get to know a cute girl—Failing to manifest such ulterior motives his heart, Hal refused her firmly.

As a result, the girl grinned with a look that seemed to say "Oh."

"Come on, don't be like that. All you need to do is visit our club room for a bit and leisurely fill out your name and class on our club membership form! After that you can be a ghost member if that's what you want, but if you're interested, you can come over after school for some fun or join in our regular

weekend gatherings. Wouldn't it be nice to spend the days of your youth in a fulfilling way?"

An invitation to club activities? Hal nodded.

Were it not for this reason, this girl probably would not have tried to make conversation with Hal specifically, right?

It was only the second week, but this girl was already going around, trying to recruit members for the club which she belonged to. She seemed to be lively as her appearance suggested. Hal recalled that her name should be Mutou.

"And your club is?"

"The UFO Research Club. If we don't find two more members, we'll lose the room our club is using."

"Well, I'm not interested in chasing after flying saucers," replied Hal after hearing the girl bring up a club whose name sounded so suspicious.

"Everyone keeps saying the same thing. Looks like bringing boys over to the club room is already taxing the limits of my charm stat. But you won't even make a visit, Haruga-kun."

"I think it's not a bad approach towards recruiting members."

Mutou's sighing tone of voice instilled Hal with a sense of camaraderie.

Given appropriate suggestions, solving the problem should not be difficult with her level of energy. Hal tried the following:

"How about you don't take people to the club room and instead invite them straight a three-day camp. After pushing them to their limits using hunger, sleep deprivation and psychological pressure, you can gently console your targets and make them dependent on you. To finish up, you can have them sign their names on the club entry form."

"No way, you're actually an unscrupulous person, Haruga-kun!?"

Hal had recommended a typical brainwashing technique, causing Mutou to jump in fright.

"Well, the method I recommended is actually the mildest one I could think of... I guess it's a bit too intense for Japanese schools?"

"I'm pretty sure that goes for schools in any country!"

"Anyway, a club that studies UFOs, eh? I thought such hobbies had already gone extinct by the end of the twentieth century."

"Eh, why's that?"

"Because we're currently in an era when dragons come flying from the moon, suddenly appearing in the sky..."

Hal pointed to the sky's vast expanse outside the window.

"I don't think the sky has any remaining space for unknown lifeforms from the universe to hover in flying saucers, whether Adamski-style or cigar-shaped."

"Ahhh, so that's what you're thinking of? Wrong, wrong."

Smiling, Mutou-san waved her hands to refute.

"The UFOs we chase are not flying saucers but the dragons you just mentioned."

Hal only needed to think slightly before understanding immediately.

The acronym UFO officially stood for "Unidentified Flying Object." It did not originally mean flying saucer but was a codename for unknown flying entities. In that sense, just as Mutou-san pointed out, the dragons were currently the biggest and most numerous UFOs.

"Then your club activities involve--"

"Yes, the study of dragons as lifeforms. See, although the government and the JSDF deny hiding and censoring information about the dragons, in actual fact, they are doing it. So in order to collect as much correct information as possible, we have to take action as civilian volunteers."

"..."

"Also, we basically have no concrete understanding of the 'serpents' humans use to repel dragons. Since it's not like they're shiny silver aliens from Nebula

M78, there must be something kept under wraps, but they won't disclose anything to ordinary people."

To think the conversation would even bring up "serpents."

Hal was quite surprised. This happened to fall under his field of work, namely the Metaphysical Body of Knowledge that the research organization SAURU devoted its efforts to disseminate.

"Anyway, we only know that they're lifeforms similar to dragons... Also, they're guardian deities or biological weapons of war that are protecting humans for some kind of reason. Oh, by the way..."

Never expecting this type of topic to come up in conversation at a Japanese high school, Hal found it perplexing. While he was thinking that, Mutou-san continued.

"When dragons fly nearby, we also head out to high places to take images."

"You go that far!?"

"Yeah, then we release them on the internet. So, seeing as you've misunderstood our club activities, I'll ask you once more: Haruga-kun, would you like to join our research club? It's quite interesting."

Just as Hal was pondering how to respond, someone suddenly joined the conversation from the side.

"I know it's very impolite for me to interrupt your conversation, but please allow me to interject a few words."

The girl sitting in the seat to Hal's right had turned towards them.

Hal was quite surprised because ever since Year 1 Class F came into being, the noisily chatting boys and girls had rarely approached this female student.

Nevertheless, she was not one of those "unsociable nobodies" like Hal. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Precisely because her presence stood out too much, she became a "solitary person."

"Regarding your club, Mutou-san, I've been having the same misunderstanding as Haruga-kun. I never expected you to be a community that tries to contribute to society so seriously... I suppose this serves as an example of why we shouldn't make judgments based on preconceived notions," murmured Juujouji Orihime emphatically, the girl with excessive presence.

Due to the rarity of both her family and given names, Hal had retained a strong impression of her as well.

"Oh, it's nowhere as amazing as what you make it out to be... We club members only do it because we like it."

"Even so, your noble deeds are still admirable."

Although Mutou-san acted very modest, Orihime offered her praise generously.

Elegant, refined, graceful, magnanimous—

Various virtues typically lacking in high school girls could be found in Orihime's comportment.

Like Hal, she was seated in the last row at the back of the classroom. But unlike Hal who sat all lonesome by himself like a Japanese house spirit, Orihime's sitting posture was very upright as though she were a noble princess presiding over this classroom.



Paying serious attention to all lessons, performing gallantly during PE class to showcase her excellent athleticism and outstanding figure to the surrounding people, she was extremely capable and talented.

(So she resembles a princess not only in appearance but internally as well?)

Speaking of people whose personalities failed to live up to their appearances, Hal had his childhood friend Asya as an example.

Possibly, Juujouji Orihime was also—Hal secretly speculated. But imagining such things seemed too impolite. Hal silently apologized in his heart.

Unaware of Hal's thoughts, Orihime took out a B5-sized sheet of paper from her desk.

It was a club entry form. With beautiful handwriting, she wrote down "Juujouji Orihime, Year 1 Class F" then handed the form to Mutou-san.

"You need club members, don't you? I am willing to help."

"Eh, are you sure!?"

"Yes. I might have needed more time to think over the matter if you hadn't mentioned the option of being ghost members. But since ghost members are accepted, I see no reason to hesitate any further," said Orihime as she took her schoolbag and stood up.

"Oh, if it's okay with you, please feel free to visit our club classroom for some fun next time."

"Of course, if I feel so inclined and happen to be free. But I am quite busy, so I'm sorry I cannot readily promise anything. Please don't be too expectant," replied Orihime cheerfully after hearing Mutou-san's invitation from behind.

With these honest words without any nuance of sarcasm, Orihime quickly walked over to the classroom entrance. Her every movement was truly dashing and gallant.

"...Almost like a person from a painting," muttered Hal subconsciously to himself as he watched Orihime depart.

Curry shop, cafe, massage parlor, used bookstore, DVD shop, etc.

Anastasya Rubashvili aka Asya was currently on the fourth floor of a multi-tenant building. To be precise, she was inside a used bookstore called Mirokudou.

Even more precisely, she was at the cash register.

Nevertheless, she was not in the middle of a part-time job. Originally, she had simply come here as a customer.

Sighing lightly, sitting on the round stool, Asya turned her gaze to a book on her thighs. Two hours had passed since the the shop manager, the only member of the sales staff, had asked her to help watch the store.

During this time, not even a single customer arrived. In other words, the shop was in a state of being open but halted in business.

As commonly seen in shops of this type where nary a comic book was put on display, this hard-line used bookstore had never undergone thorough organization at all. Books that could not fit on the occupied shelves were piled up haphazardly like towers of waste paper all over the store's interior.

Aisha's appearance was very out of place in this old and filthy store.

She was a beautiful young maiden.

The delicate features of her well-proportioned face seemed somewhat dreamy while her blue-tinted silver hair also gave off an intense air of mysteriousness.

Her slender body looked fragile enough to break from a single hug. Naturally blessed in appearance, this Eastern European girl possessed a body that could be described as like a fairy's.

"Good work. You really helped me out by looking after the shop."

Kagetsudou's glass door suddenly slid open sideways as a young man entered.

The man had an elegant face that one could describe as handsome without feeling like a liar at all. However, his unkempt beard and wrinkled shirt made for a big minus on favorable first impressions.

Kenjou Genya. This bookstore's owner. A young man roughly twenty-five or six in age.

"This is a local specialty, curry bread. Consider it a gesture of thanks."

"Compared to local specialties, I'd prefer if you could have returned at least thirty minutes earlier," grumbled Asya while accepting the paper bag that was handed to her.

It was past noon when Asya had visited the bookstore to check out the latest shipment of used books. Then the young Mr. Kenjou had asked her to watch over the store. Thinking he would return quickly, Asya had casually agreed without thinking.

"Why did you spend two hours when all you did was having lunch at a curry shop in the same building?"

"Well, that's because I was chatting with the shopkeeper about 'How's business going?' and 'So-so I suppose' and stuff like that. Then after the meal, I read four sports newspapers while drinking coffee, which ended up taking quite a bit of time."

"Please find a better excuse than slacking off, no matter how true it may be. By the way..."

Asya peered into the bag of the gift:

"This appears to be baked curry bread... But compared to the baked version, I like deep-fried curry bread even more. If it's not too much trouble, please buy the deep-fried one next time. I enjoy the crispy texture of deep-fried bread."

One of Asya's talents was the ability to adjust to any country's culinary culture without any difficulty.

Having started to live in Tokyo New Town less than a month ago, she had already reached the level where she was able to critique pedestrian bread varieties innovated by the Japanese.

"You're a girl after all. Try to eat a little healthier."

"Don't worry. Just as you can see, I've got the type of constitution that never gets fat no matter how much I eat," declared Asya as she placed her hand on her flat chest.

Despite ingesting vast amounts of food every day that would astonish any onlooker, her fairy-like body of fantasy never accumulated any weight in fat at all.

Nevertheless, Kenjou refuted her while making a fool's expression on purpose:

"Rather than constitution, it's thanks to the metabolism of your youth, isn't it? After a certain age, abnormal eating habits will reflect on your body all at once, you know? Especially Caucasian females, their body mass tends to expand sideways after they grow up, causing their overall figure to go out of shape."

"Th-That'll never happen to me! Absolutely never!"

Asya could not help but yell after hearing his offensive comments.

As a side note, her retort was completely baseless, no different from a spinal reflex.

"Putting that aside, Kenjou-san, I'd like this one and that one."

"Thank you for your patronage. It's wonderful that something managed to catch your eye, Asya-san," thanked Kenjou after seeing the secondhand books that Asya had picked out.

The titles were *Nicolas Flamel and the Magic of Kings* and *Anthology of Secret Love Poetry from Past and Present*. This unique combination comprised an ancient foreign text with a Japanese book dating from the early Shouwa period, but Asya was capable of reading both without any trouble at all.

Awakening as a witch conferred a number of special powers.

One of them was an exceptional capacity for linguistic learning. Even foreign languages with absolutely no prior exposure could be used as fluently as a mother tongue after merely two months of training.

"Can I pay the usual way?"

"Sure. Just transfer the funds into this branch's account before the end of the month."

Kenjou nodded in response to Asya's question for confirmation.

The Mirokudou was not just an ordinary used bookstore where business was slow.

At the same time, it was also a branch of the research organization SAURU. That said, this branch was so small that it could not accommodate more than eight assigned members...

"Although I've traveled all over the world, this is my first time seeing such a small branch."

"That's the way it is. This store was originally just a place for selling strange books about supernatural phenomena or purchasing them in return. It only became the branch office after the organization withdrew from New Town," muttered Kenjou after hearing Asya's comment.

The two books Asya had just bought were both part of the Metaphysical Body of Knowledge—in other words, books about magic written by "researchers" in olden times.

"Although my title is shop manager, I was originally just a direct subordinate under our boss—Hiiragi-neesan."

"Speaking of which, I noticed that this store only opens for business two days a week."

In order to access the store when the manager was out, Asya and Haruomi both held a spare key each in their possession.

Seeing Kenjou smiling lightly, Asya shrugged and asked, "Come on, SAURU is a global organization after all, isn't it?"

"Yes. But if a city doesn't have many of their members, the organization will only provide relatively lukewarm support for that branch. You see, isn't this what's known as a rational business model?"

"I can't believe that a secret association is devoting its efforts towards streamlined management, that's so mundane..."

"Despite having members distributed globally, the organization has nothing to do with the various urban legends about secretly controlling the governments of various nations. In fact as of right now, there are perhaps only three people officially registered with headquarters who are actually living in New Town. Me, Asya-san and—"

"Haruomi, I guess."

"Indeed, Haruga-sensei's son. You'll be meeting him shortly, right?"

"...What are you talking about?"

Asya immediately played dumb in response to having her plan exposed.

She was not committing a crime. There was no problem even if she told her plans to Kenjou.

Nevertheless, she tried to conceal the fact because she found it embarrassing.

Asya turned her body away unobtrusively in an attempt to block Kenjou's view with her slender body, preventing him from seeing the basket at the checkout counter.

However, the young man said tactlessly with great curiosity, "That basket is giving off the aroma of sauce. Is it a packed lunch? Did you bring it along in hopes of eating it together with that boy?"

"O-O-O-On what grounds are you making such a claim!?"

"Nothing much, Asya-san, I was just thinking you'd have finished the food during the time you were waiting for my return if the packed lunch were only meant for yourself. It happened to be noontime too."

Young Mr. Kenjou had gone out during 12:30pm to 2pm.

Asya's stomach had subtly growled dozens of times already to express her hunger. Ever time her stomach rumbled, she kept staring intently at the basket she had brought.

But each time, she was able to dispel the temptation by thinking of the childhood friend she was about to meet.

"P-Please don't get any strange ideas. My plan today is gathering research materials, not going to see Haruomi... Then I'll be off."

"Oh sure. Say hi to the boy for me," said Kenjou cheerfully to Asya while she was hurrying towards the exit.

Although the young man looked dense and idle on the surface, he definitely must not be underestimated.

After leaving school, Hal received a text from Asya on his cellphone.

The text told him that her task was done and also where they were going to meet. Hal originally expected a fast food shop or in front of the train station.

"Why are we meeting in a park?"

It was true that the weather was nice today and staying outside would not be unpleasant...

Walking, Hal made his way to the large park, located closest to Ryougoku Station.

Then only after he waited casually on a park bench for ten-odd minutes, Asya made her overdue arrival.

For some reason, Asya blushed red to her ears as soon as she saw Hal's face.

"I-I didn't come here to see Haruomi, okay."

"What nonsense are you speaking? Asya."

Hal made a jab at his childhood friend's weird murmurings.

Although the reason was unknown, Asya was acting awkward, looking very shy.

"You're the one who called me here, right?"

"Y-Yes, that's true indeed! But it's not like I mean anything special. Today, I simply wanted to ask for your help in research. The thought of going out with you, Haruomi, never crossed my mind at all!"

"I know that even if you don't explain explicitly."

Hearing Hal's calm answer, Asya inexplicably glared at him in anger.

Then she set her basket down hard on the bench.

"Anyway, wars cannot be fought on empty stomachs. Have some lunch first."



"Go ahead and eat if you want. I've already had lunch."

"—Haruomi, what did you just say?"

"Like I said, I already had lunch."

"I-I can't believe I endured so desperately, yet you already went ahead to have lunch on your own!?" said Asya while her eyes accused him of betrayal. Again, the reason for this was a mystery to Hal.

"Of course. I've been attending school obediently all this time, after all. Naturally, I'd take care of lunch at the cafeteria during the lunch break."

"No way... I was thinking you'd skip school for a whole week straight, Haruomi."

"Don't underestimate how serious I can be. However, I do intend to find a random excuse to transfer to a distance learning high school after going to school dutifully for a month or so."

"This type of scheming and lack of seriousness is certainly very much in your style, Haruomi... Oh, however."

With surprise showing on her face, Asya suddenly came back to her senses and said, "On further thought, Haruomi, you are a boy after all. You shouldn't have any trouble eating a second lunch. Come, let's have lunch together."

"Please allow me to refuse your kind offer. You made it yourself, right? In that case, surely as one would expect—"

Hal unceremoniously opened the basket.

Arranged neatly inside were sandwiches as the main course along with cooked vegetable side dishes and fruit.

Asya was not only a voracious eater but an excellent cook as well. However...

"Just as I guessed. What are you thinking, making all the sandwiches with pork chop cutlets as fillings? I just had a pork chop cutlet rice bowl for lunch, so this is a bit hard to stomach..."

"You are mistaken. Please look more carefully."

"Whether the golden color of the outside layer of batter, deep-fried to perfection, or the whiteness of the pork's cross-sections, there's no room for misunderstanding at all. A total of twelve pork chop cutlet sandwiches, am I wrong?"

Asya began to snicker in response to Hal's accusation.

"Although they're all deep-fried cutlets, there are a total of three variants: steak, pork chop and chicken. This is your chance to enjoy their respective flavors and textures."

"...I see."

Taking a closer look, Hal found the red meat of four deep-fried steak sandwiches mixed among them.

Hence, the two of them opened the handmade packed lunch on the park bench and began to enjoy a lavish meal—Asya's first lunch for today but the second lunch for Hal.

The weather was bright and clear with a gentle breeze. The spring sky was blue and refreshing.

Despite the excellent picnic weather, Hal's appetite was naturally quite subdued.

Trying to minimize damage to his digestive system, Hal went for the ratatouille and pickles.

"Don't just keep eating vegetables. You need your meat and carbs too. Compared to biased vegetarianism, a balanced diet is the shortcut towards good health."

"That's totally unconvincing coming from you," responded Hal to Asya's advice.

Then Hal finally picked up a cutlet sandwich and took a bite.

The noteworthy(?) first sandwich tasted of pork.

The outer layer was still moist despite the passage of time since the deep-frying. The pork chop was thick and chewy in texture, while the sauce was

especially delicious. Only a mixture of store-bought sauce with ketchup and mustard could produce this type of complicated flavor.

The ratatouille serving as a side dish was also rich in flavor while the pickles were personally made by Asya herself.

To be honest, Asya was an excellent chef no matter how unflattering Hal's view of her.

"...So long as the choice of food isn't on the heavy side and the volume isn't so excessive that there are leftovers..."

"What did you say, Haruomi?"

"No, nothing. By the way, let me give you a bit of honest advice."

After she had consumed four deep-fried cutlet sandwiches, Hal said to Asya with a serious look, "I know that you're proud of your constitution that prevents you from getting fat easily, but that's only because you're young, right? We'll be in our twenties and thirties eventually. I think it's best if you start now to slowly get used to applying restraint, so that you won't have to worry about dieting in the future."

"E-Et tu, Brute!?"

"Why are you quoting Julius Caesar's last words...?"

Seeing Asya sulking dramatically, Hal cocked his head in puzzlement.

The contents of the basket were definitely in the process of decreasing. As a side note, out of the twelve cutlet sandwiches, Hal's share was three while Asya's was nine.

"By the way, how's Rusalka's condition?"

"Not too good... No, it's terrible. I fear that her days are numbered."

Asya answered Hal's question while she was eating.

Rather than consoling Hal, she probably hesitated for a moment because she wanted to say something optimistic to comfort herself.

But in the end, she did not do that. She had already prepared herself to accept the depressing ending.

Due to their deep friendship, Hal was unable to offer Asya comforting words irresponsibly at such a time.

Sighing, he changed this tone and said, "I see. She was such a good 'serpent.'"

"Yes, she was a reliable partner."

Hal was using past tense prematurely while Asya was presumably misusing it on purpose.

As childhood friends, the two of them had shared many joys and happy memories. The same went for unfortunate, sorrowful, unreasonable or irrevocable experiences.

Hal did not have the sentimental sense to offer appropriate remarks for times like these.

Hence, he silently chewed on the bread and chicken cutlet of his sandwich while sitting side by side with Asya.

It was the same back when they had met up shortly after the passing away of Asya's grandmother. Meeting up three months after Hal's father passed away from illness, she had also leaned herself against him on her own accord without saying a word.

Perhaps this might be what Asya called their "bond."

"Now that our stomachs are filled, it's time to go," announced Asya cheerfully, having finished lunch.

Hal could not sense from her body any trace effects of either the hearty consumption of nine cutlet sandwiches or the depressing subject of conversation.

Her tone of voice was the same as usual. On the other hand, Hal chose to nod silently in response and could not be bothered to speak due to his overloaded stomach. But ignoring the weight in his gut, Hal quickly stood up.

Although Hal and Asya were absolutely dissimilar, they did share one common feature.

Namely, neither of them were prone to the wasteful behavior of letting sorrow hinder their ability to take action. This was perhaps due to courage distilled from a life filled with danger and final farewells combined with their rugged personalities.

Part 4

After the late lunch at the park, Hal and Asya made their way to the station.

Including the Yamanote Line or the Chūō Main Line, the majority of the rail lines formerly managed by business conglomerates had stopped running a long time ago. Nowadays, local residents were left with only the loop line encircling Tokyo New Town as well as what was left of the subway system as options for mass transit.

Hal and Asya's destination was Shin-Kiba in the Kōtō ward.

While the train carried them along the New Town loop line, they were instantly presented with the striking scenery. This was because the Sumida River was visible from the elevated railway where the train was traveling.

"Oh right, it's possible to see that side from these parts," mumbled Hal softly while holding onto the train's ring-shaped handgrip.

Stretched out on the opposite shore of the Sumida River was the scenery formerly known as the Asakusa district.

Furthermore, there was the black pillar of stone, standing upright on the other end—

It was shaped as an equilateral triangular prism. The colour was completely pitch-black without any impurity, giving off a lustrous gleam like obsidian.

This pure-black triangular prism was standing upright in a corner of what used to be the Chiyoda ward.

Despite its location, the stone pillar was still clearly visible even from the window of a train running along the Sumida River. Standing at over a kilometre in height, the stone pillar was a landmark dwarfing all tall buildings in Japan.

"As expected of a Monolith. These things stand out so much no matter what country they're in."

"That being said, it's not a pleasant scene by any stretch."

Hal and Asya sighed together after remarking quietly.

Concession territories ceded to dragonkind were scattered all over the world, numbering more than two hundred. Erected at each of these locations was the same type of ominous black pillar—the Monolith.

"Old Tokyo" consisted of what used to be Tokyo's hub area back when the city was still Japan's capital.

The special wards of Shinjuku, Chiyoda, Chūō, Bunkyo, Taitō, Shibuya, Minato, etc...

No longer inhabitable, this area was currently just an expanse of deserted wasteland as far as the eye could see, a "dead city."

Currently displayed before Hal and Asya on the opposite shore of the Sumida River was also Old Tokyo.

A cityscape was visible from the train window.

There was not even a single pedestrian outside. Every building was derelict.

All glass had been shattered. The streets were quite messy overall because there was no one to clean up. There was a lack of vitality but the sight of this unusual scenery gradually grew distant...

Because the train was leaving Sumida River and approaching Shin-Kiba.

Hal and Asya alighted at the Shin-Kiba Station.

Ever since the destruction caused by the dragons suddenly flying in ten years ago, this area had turned into land marked for redevelopment. This maritime territory essentially consisted of empty land as far as the eye could see.

Hal and Asya walked in silence.

Their destination was roughly ten minutes away from the station on foot.

Specially planted cedar and cypress trees formed a small patch of forest where a building, their destination, had been built. Its appearance resembled a small library.

However, there were no signs or direction boards to explain what kind of facility this was.

"Here is my identification."

At the reception, Asya presented a card that was the size of a business card.

There was nothing written on the card. Whether front or back, both sides were completely black. However, any person possessing magical sight would be able to see the blue and white pattern that was drawn on the black card.

An emblem consisting of two staves crossed with each other, surrounded by a circle formed from a serpent devouring its own tail—

This was precisely SAURU's symbol.

This mark belonged to the secret association and research organization that dedicated itself towards the research and proliferation of magic.

SAURU was the world's one and only think tank capable of establishing covenants between witches and serpents. This card served as proof of identification for SAURU's members.

The middle-aged man at the reception desk was dressed in an exceedingly ordinary suit.

Furthermore, he was wearing silver-rimmed glasses whose lenses were supposed to be enchanted. Hal also possessed something similar.

Witches were able to activate magical sight by using their naked eyes alone.

On the other hand, commoners must rely on enchanted tools in order to obtain magical sight temporarily. As expected, the middle-aged man simply glanced at Asya's card once before nodding to authorize her entry into the building.

"It'd be so much easier if facial recognition could be used almost all the time. But it's possible that people might not want to associate with suspicious characters like us," remarked Hal not long after entering the building, prompting Asya to respond immediately.

"Please don't include me so nonchalantly. Speaking of first impressions, mine are definitely much better than yours, Haruomi."

"Yeah. After all, you're an extremely cute girl."

"Eh... Jeez—Haruomi... Fufu."

Asya suddenly made an expression of delight as the corners of her lips curled adorably in a smile.

She had this weird habit of getting unusually elated whenever Hal complimented her appearance.

"Oh dear, but in your case, one begins to understand increasingly that the first impression is nothing more than an illusion as time goes by. Maybe you'd better work on addressing that a little."

"No, Haruomi, you're the one who should work on fixing your bad habit of elevating others with compliments before cruelly dropping them from great heights!"

Asya always flew into an instant rage whenever this subject was broached.

But today, she immediately calmed her fury and changed the subject.

"Ease of entry into this place would be good and all, but I think it's better to adhere more to procedure. After all, this is a precious Witch Mansion."

"But aren't Mansions in regional cities or villages mostly like this?"

At the moment, there was only one mage-serpent team defending Tokyo New Town.

Asya was present too, but since her partner was currently facing certain difficulties, she probably should not be included in the count.

"A region fortunate enough to have three or four witch-serpent teams would probably show more vitality. But looking at the current state of affairs around the world, the vast majority of cities don't even have a single team, right? In fact, this city's serpent apparently needs to venture all over the Kantou region when dragons attack."

"The shortage of manpower is severe everywhere..."

"Thanks to that, there is no shortage of work for us. But Asya—"

Hal and Asya made their way into the depths of the facility.

Walking to the corridor from the reception desk, they then took the elevator down to the second floor underground.

After keying in the code to open the automatic door at the far end, they made their way down the staircase behind the door, finally arriving at the deepest level, the fifth floor underground—

This was a library where all sorts of books recording taboo knowledge were kept.

Just by stepping in there, one would feel their back and the soles of their feet stiffen from the cold.

The cold air-conditioning and especially the spiritual energies residing in the large number of "tomes with power" went as far as to mercilessly steal warmth from Hal and Asya's bodies.

"Those people in Europe will likely get mad if they heard 'shortage of manpower' coming from your lips. All things considered, your Rushalka was still a summoned "serpent"—a *leviathan*—of the strongest class over there until three months ago."

Despite Hal's hobby and lifelong goal of saving money...

His childhood friend had actually outstripped him in terms of progress in this area.

Asya was one of Europe's top magi. For the past few years, she had fought dragons persistently by drawing out the maximum potential of her partner, Blue Rushalka.

Her bank account should have accumulated the remunerations and contract payments from the many battles she had experienced.

"Didn't they approach you repeatedly with courtesy, asking you to return as soon as possible?"

"Indeed... But Rushalka's problem is still unresolved and I also have research I'd like to conduct here in Tokyo."

This was reportedly Asya's second visit to this library.

As eastern Japan's largest vault of grimoires, this place was built so that the "tomes with power" gathered by civilian volunteers could be used with effectiveness by people knowledgeable in magic like Hal or outstanding witches like Asya.

This was a source of knowledge, both mysterious and dangerous.

Being that kind of place, this library was nowhere near comfortable. The arrangement of the excessively abundant bookshelves was difficult to navigate, being as complicated as a labyrinth. Furthermore, in consideration of the fact that old books were susceptible to degradation from light, illumination was limited to the brightness level of candlelight at exceedingly sparse numbers.

Thanks to that, the library was virtually pitch black.

For the sake of finding their targeted books more efficiently, Hal and Asya decided to split up to search separately.

Carrying their own flashlights, they wandered the labyrinth of books on their own.

Asya searched for the wanted books in the catalog while Hal worked from the ground up and confirmed the names of the books kept on the shelves.

Foreign books included *The Secret Manuscript of the Terrifying Ogdoad*, *Commentaries on the Dark Goddess of Magdala*, *The Mutual Action between Earth and Water in the Universe*, *The Various Aspects of Hermes' Alchemy* and others. Japanese books included *The Handy Guide to Curse Magic*, *Secret Collections of the Mystical*, etc. In addition, there were Buddhist treatises such as *Discourses on the Golden Light Sutra* and *Presentation of Ākāśagarbha's Esoteric Doctrine Method*. There was also a full assortment of Chinese classics including *Forbidden Truths of Divine Talismans*, *The Compendium of Roots, Herbs and Longevity Practices*, *Divine Technique of the Sky*, *Secret Records of the Grand Supreme Lord*, *Secret Guide to the Normal Course for Rulers and Kings...*

But none of these were what Hal and Asya sought.

Reading grimoires of this level without prior preparation would result in terrifying results.

One would likely hallucinate immediately after reading them? Monsters would definitely appear in dreams if one were to fall asleep. Then growing more haggard and emaciated with each passing day, one would walk along a path of mental chaos, eventually reaching insanity...

This time, what Asya wanted was information on unorthodox magic research.

The field included archaeology, folkloristics and comparative mythology, etc.

Books in this area were quite plentiful and many rare and precious volumes, normally impossible to obtain, were casually placed around here.

For quite a while, Hal worked steadily and persistently, alone at his task—

But just at this moment, a gust of cold air suddenly blew across his the back of his neck.

Due to the nature of his line of work, Hal could be described as what one would call a person with sharp senses. Furthermore, this place was filled with large amounts of ghostly and spiritual energies.

There were many cases when people would be affected by them and end up possessed by "unclean things" with endless occurrences of paranormal

phenomena as well. In fact, Hal had also experienced it a number of times in the past.

"Please just be an ordinary spirit, without any additional prefix of 'evil' or 'vengeful,' I beg you..."

Grumbling like an expert, Hal turned his head to look back at the same time.

—There. Hal saw a pair of gleaming eyes in the depths of the darkness.

Just eyes, nothing more. The pupils were golden. Despite looking like human eyeballs for the most part, they carried a reptilian air about them.

Intimidated and stunned by the air of mystery exuded by the golden eyes, Hal could not help but gasp.

(Hoh... To possess something so interesting despite being just an ordinary human—)

It was not very clear, but Hal seemed to hear a girl's quiet whispers.

He waited cautiously in an attempt to catch the continuation clearly, but—

"...It already left?"

Failing to hear more of the voice after waiting for roughly two minutes, Hal sighed.

The mysterious spiritual being had apparently left, but it was probably still lurking somewhere in the library...

Hal shrugged and resumed his task.

Surviving in his line of business would be impossible if one were to become neurotic over occurrences of this level.

Dozens of minutes after the spirit(?) encounter, Hal met up with Asya in a corner of the library.

Of the childhood friend's list of books she wanted to have a look, they managed to find three of them today—*The History of East Asian Legends of*

Dragon Gods, Ancient Korea and Collective Rites of Secret Cults and Theory of Equestrian Tribal Dynasty and the Second Coming of Japan's Mythical Age.

In addition, when Hal brought up his spirit encounter just now, the childhood simply remarked: "Oh, these occurrences are commonplace."

Had their roles been reversed, Hal would surely have said the same thing.

"Then let's start."

"Understood. It's really quite convenient that rare ancient books can be digitized."

Hal took out his portable terminal while replying to Asya.

The two of them flipped the books open and took pictures with a cellphones. Turning the pages from cover to cover and repeatedly photographing, they converted the contents into digital data stored using information technology.

This act would be meaningless if these were grimoires imbued with power.

That type of book possessed magical power (one could also call it a curse) that pulled the reader into special mental states. It was only possible to understand those books' true meaning by reading with full attention, under the effects of these abnormal emotions, regardless whether they were happiness, anger, sadness or even madness.

Although the text could be digitized through scanning or photographing, magical properties could not be recreated.

Asya was responsible for turning the pages while Hal snapped photo after photo to record the data.

The two of them worked for a full three hours, interspersed with breaks in between. Just as their work was winding down to an end, Hal and Asya suddenly heard footsteps.

Thud, thud, thud, thud. The sound of leather soles striking the floor.

The footsteps were very stable and steady, yet filled with a rhythmic sense of musicality.

It felt as though the person walking must possess an excellent sense of rhythm and athleticism in order to make such spectacular footsteps. Furthermore, the person's murmurings could be heard.

"This place is really quite outrageous... I think it needs to be organized a bit, or rearranged in consideration for ease of use... I guess I'll talk to Hazumi about it next time."

Hal was greatly surprised. He had heard this voice before.

"A witch? But somehow I get the slight feeling that..."

Next to Hal, Asya cocked her head in puzzlement. She probably felt that the visitor seemed greatly out of place, not like a witch who would come to this type of disreputable den. It was only natural for Asya to think that. Hal nodded.

This girl looked looked glamorous, gallant and radiant with an extremely wholesome air.

However, this was a pitch-black and depressing space filled with ghostly energies.

No matter how one wrapped their mind around it, she did not match this place at all. That being said—

"This is actually my first time meeting other visitors in this place. Please excuse my intrusion. But if it is agreeable with you, I would be most grateful if you could tell me how to use this library effectively. Although I've been here a number of times, I still haven't gotten used to it—Eh, Haruga-kun?"

The third person arrived before Hal and Asya. Just as Hal thought, he had recognized her correctly.

Standing before them was the classmate who had left the deepest impression upon him, the one and only Juujouji Orihime in the flesh.

Part 5

Orihime's beautiful face was filled with surprise.

In contrast, Hal hid his inner thoughts and simply shrugged with a mutter of "Who would have thought." Life was full of unpredictable futures.

On the other hand, Asya stared at Orihime with suspicion before turning her gaze towards Hal.

"Looks like it's someone you know, Haruomi. Did you arrange to meet up here by any chance? After helping me with my task, then roaming town with this person at night, keeping her up until morning... You wouldn't happen to have made such shameless plans, would you?"

For some reason, the childhood friend's tone of voice and eyes were filled with accusatory reprimand.

Despite the inexplicable sense of discomfort, Hal still answered quietly, "She's my classmate in high school. Running into each other here is pure coincidence... No, I guess it might be inevitable after all. Sigh, Juujouji-san, seeing as you're able to enter this place, are you also a witch?"

Hal's question prompted Orihime to recover her usual demeanor and said, "I shall tell you if you would agree to answer my question, Haruga-kun. To my understanding, this library can only be used by women such as witches or people with magic-related knowledge, isn't that correct? Why are you here with that person over there, Haruga-kun?"

Her stately tone of voice was making Hal force a wry smile. His attempt to obtain information from her without giving up anything in return was apparently not working.

"Excuse me for the late introductions. This is who we are."

After searching around in his pocket, Hal fished out a black card the size of a name card.

This card served as proof of his membership in SAURU, identical to what Asya had presented at the reception except for the fact that the card had become crumpled and creased inside his pocket.

"The surface of this card is totally black without any words... Does this kind of thing hold some kind of meaning in the world of magi? Sorry, I actually don't understand the rules in this domain."

However, Orihime simply tilted her head in puzzlement. She was apparently unable to see the SAURU emblem.

A witch would be able to invoke magical sight just by using the naked eye, but Orihime could not do it. In that case, the most likely reason was—Just as Hal figured out Orihime's background...

Hal, Asya and Orihime's cellphones all vibrated simultaneously. They had all received a text at the same time.

"Emergency evacuation announcement... Four lesser dragons have flown into Tokyo Bay's airspace—"

Asya looked over the text message she had received on her cellphone and read out its contents quietly.

"Haruomi and the lady over there, let's find shelter first and save the talking for later."

Hal and Orihime immediately responded with the same action. They both nodded.

Twenty years prior, dragonkind had "returned" to the planet Earth.

However, these super lifeforms did not choose to make Earth their place of residence.

Instead, they lived far on the other end of the sky—

Crossing the atmosphere, they had colonized satellite orbits and the moon's surface.

The dragons all possessed flight capability and survivability enabling them to break through the atmosphere by their own power. Humans were no longer surprised even after learning of this fact. But after learning of dragonkind's certain habits, people probably prayed to their worshiped gods or cursed their own fates.

Dragons frequently attacked, spurred by impromptu destructive impulses.

They would then descend upon Earth from either the moon's surface or satellite orbits, visiting human settlements.

Then they proceeded to destroy everything mercilessly. The winged attackers demolished cities, trampled towns and incinerated villages, thereby satiating their destructive urges.

Furthermore, these attacks were mostly conducted collectively...

Humanity had protested against these vicious "Dragons Strikes" with extreme anger.

These grievances were aired at the giant red dragon who had called himself the representative of dragonkind and customarily established an "embassy" at New York.

This resulted in that particular "king" appearing in front of CNN's cameras and generously declaring in an astounding tenor voice:

"It is truly regrettable that such problems have arisen. Consequently, as the representative of dragonkind, I promise you all, humans, we shall refrain absolutely from interfering if you were to exercise your right to self-defense against berserk members of our kind. I hereby swear upon my title as king."

Despite the clearly solemn tone of voice, the words coming from his mouth were absolutely irresponsible.

In short, his message was "I don't intend to take up the responsibility of overseeing my kind, so do your best to defend yourselves."

Hence, humans in the twenty-first century had no choice but to coexist with terrifying predators—the dragons that attacked from the air.

However, one saving grace could be considered a blessing mixed in the curse.

Lesser dragons, forming the majority of dragonkind, were relatively easy to defeat.

That being said, that assessment was based on expert perspectives and differed somewhat from common perceptions. In the process of evacuating from the library's fifth floor underground to the ground surface, Orihime murmured with worry, "Dragons... will reach New Town?"

"Judging by common logic, chances should be very low seeing as there are only four of them," answered Hal.

As a side note, they were rapidly ascending the stairs instead of taking the elevator because getting trapped in the event of a power failure would be problematic.

Asya was leading the way with Orihime in the middle and Hal holding the rear.

"If the swarm of dragons number less than twenty, they can still be exterminated by deploying a squadron of fighter jets at a hundred million USD apiece or billion-dollar aircraft carriers and destroyers in a desperate struggle to deliver missiles or artillery shells extravagantly at hundreds of thousands of dollars per barrage. Compared to what you see in monster movies in the past, this method of fighting works much better although it's admittedly quite low in cost effectiveness."

"But Haruga-kun, you said 'by common logic' just now, didn't you?"

Orihime had caught the ambiguous part of Hal's statement.

She still seemed calm despite the current situation. Hal could not help but feel impressed by her excellent courage.

"If we don't go by common logic, how would that change your earlier prediction?"

"Hmm... The dragons were detected in Tokyo Bay's airspace, quite near the shore. Even if only a single dragon slips past and flies to Tokyo, it could easily turn into a serious emergency."

"Something will inevitably slip through..." whispered Asya as well.

Coming from her, an experienced combatant, these words felt even more real.

"In addition, although it's quite rare, if instead of lesser dragons—Raptors—we have the Equites that are capable of human speech... in other words, elite dragons, then the danger level will immediately rise to Code Red."

"Raptors? What are they?"

Hal's intentional use of technical jargon in his explanation left Orihime tilting her head in puzzlement.

As expected, she was a layperson—At least currently still. Hal nodded secretly to himself before supplementing his explanation.

"It's a shortened form of the scientific nomenclature used for dragonkind. You should be learning it in the near future... How's the situation on the surface now?"

The trio had finally finished climbing stairs, arriving at the ground floor.

They quickened their pace and ran, swiftly rushing to the emergency exit. The man at the reception had disappeared somewhere, most likely gone to seek refuge.

The trio instantly left the building then expressed their emotions in their respective ways.

"This has turned troublesome," said Hal, scratching his head.

"Raptor..." whispered Asya, her gaze turning sharp.

"No way. Why here out of all places?" Orihime was wholly stunned.

The three of them looked up into the night sky. The sun had set a long time ago.

Illuminated by the crescent moon's especially vivid radiance, the starlight from the spring constellations and the street lighting, a ferocious winged beast was currently circling in the air above—

Seven meters or so in length, its body displayed the color of steel.

Reptilian head, body and limbs. A snake for a tail. The bat-like wings were flapping strenuously. These details matched that of the creature occupying the depths of Hal's memories.

A dragon. Lesser dragons: Raptor Draconis.

Hal, Asya and Orihime's worries had come true.

Penetrating the defensive net formed from the Trans-Pacific Defense Organization (TPDO), the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) and the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF), this dragon had finally arrived in Tokyo New Town.

Hal also knew why it was flying over the Mansion.

"If I had to imagine a reason, that thing flew here because it was attracted by the magical presence exuded by the Mansion..."

Dragons had a crazed obsession for rare metals, precious metals and things containing magic.

Growing wiser as they aged, Raptors would sometimes gather such objects the way certain birds liked to collect shiny articles.

"How annoying. What a keen nose for a mere Raptor..."

No sooner had Hal grumbled when the dragon immediately roared from the sky.

ROOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAR!

A ferocious beast's roar. Sadism firing up its eyes, the dragon stared down at the Mansion on the ground.

"Hurry and run, everyone! Now that things have come to this, we can only flee and pray that our luck holds out!"

"I'll summon Rushalka if the situation gets dire, but for now, let's flee first!"

Asya concurred as soon as Orihime finished speaking.

Hal's childhood friend was capable of eliminating lesser dragon in an instant if she had the intention.

However, it looked like she wanted to save her final trump card. Or perhaps, Rushalka's condition was already so poor that Asya wanted to avoid summoning her even in this kind of predicament? Hal was curious but there was no time to explore the matter.

Hal sprinted as fast as he could while Asya and Orihime began to run at the same time as well. However—

"...Weird?"

Unbelievably, Hal felt perplexed.

His legs refused to obey him and he tripped himself, falling over forwards.

For better or worse, Haruga Haruomi had already experienced close encounters with dragons many times, confronted with the brink of life and death a number of times at that. But what was up with this?

Lying on the ground, Hal looked up into the sky.

The dragon was still circling in the sky above the Mansion. However, it was flapping its wings even harder than before while its face grew even more savage.

Wrinkling its nose severely, baring its sharp teeth, the dragon displayed its wild appearance.

Such vigor was the expression of a predator about to pounce upon its prey.

Nevertheless, Hal's body remained immobile, almost like an automobile that has exhausted its gasoline.

"W-What the heck...?"

Hal desperately squeezed out the last of his strength, trying to stand up, but did not succeed.

He wanted to sit up at least, but even that was beyond him. He could not even lift a finger. Resembling forcibly halted machinery, his body could not move at all. Was his body frozen stiff from fear?

On the other hand, his mind could ponder such useless matters with exceptional lucidity.

What was going on with himself? While feeling stunned, Hal was greatly surprised again.

Circling in the night sky, the dragon occupied his field of vision.

Red firelight suddenly lit up this scene.

Flames. Crimson flames. Blazing flames had turned the scenery before Hal's eyes into an astounding shade of red!

Then overhead, in the center of Hal's flame-filled field of view...

The strenuously flying dragon opened its jaws.

The light of blue-white flames could be seen in the depths of its throat.

The dragon was attempting to spew out Fire Breath that had cruelly incinerated many human cities. In all likelihood, the dragon probably found Hal to be an eyesore and wanted to burn him to oblivion!

"Haruga-kun! Hang in there, I am coming to save you now!"

"Haruomi!? Guh... I hereby dedicate my prayers to the ancient divine seal of purity!"

Girls' voices. During his attempt to run away, Hal had suddenly fallen over on his own and stopped.

Superficially, it looked as if the two girls had fled, leaving Hal behind.

But Orihime came running back. She intended to return to help Hal.

Hal was both shocked and angry. Orihime was truly courageous but had clearly made an error in judgment. She was going to get caught in the blast and die!

Meanwhile, Asya chanted the song of summoning and entered the stance for "calling" Rushalka.

She probably intended to deplete her partner's precious life for the sake of rescuing her foolish childhood friend.

—Damn it. I can't believe I'm embarrassing myself with such unsightliness.

Hal seethed with rage against his ineptitude. I must help Orihime survive at least, right? Just as Hal was thinking for solutions, in that very instant, the dragon in the air expelled blue-white flames forcefully.

Anger, despair and self-contempt surged from Hal's heart like magma.

But virtually at the same time, a radiant pentagram manifested in the air.

As though trying to protect Hal and the others, this pentagram appeared between the dragon's fire and the Mansion, blocking the super high-temperature blue-white flames.

The pentagram was the seal of sacred protectors, exorcising evil, slaying monsters and vanquishing demons.

While blocking the flames, the light forming the pentagram gradually changed in shape.

The star drawn by trails of light turned into a serpent depicted by trails of light.

The serpent swallowed its own tail, forming a "∞" symbol in the air.

The infinity symbol gradually materialized, turning from massless light into a corporeal creature. Then it transformed even further.

While Hal and the others watched, the light from the pentagram finished transforming into a "serpentine dragon."

This was a dragon whose form greatly differed from the dragonkind who stood as mankind's enemies.

Its body was long like a snake and had four extremely short limbs. There was a horn on its head that resembled a deer's antler in shape. Its entire body was covered with emerald scales. Overall, there was a kind of fish-like air to its appearance.

If anything, it was a "serpentine dragon" that was highly oriental in outward appearance.

"Minadzuki... You made it in time."

Trying to pick Hal up in her arms, Orihime whispered in a relieved tone of voice.

Minadzuki. This was apparently the name of this leviathan shaped like a serpentine dragon.

Leviathans were the artificial dragons born from occult and magic. Created for fighting dragonkind, these "serpents" possessed bodies similar to dragons and shared their lives with witches.

SAURU, of which Hal and Asya were members, was the organization overseeing the birth of leviathans and their covenants.

—Kyuahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Minadzuki cried out shrilly.

At this moment, the Raptor flapped its wings warily and suddenly flew up.

In contrast, Minadzuki's method of flying could be described as graceful. Twisting her body like that of a slender fish, she advanced through the air as though she were swimming.

Then she called out again. Kyuahhhhhhhhhhh!

Opening the palm of her right front limb, corresponding to a "right hand," she pushed it forward.

Her right front limb was almost twice as long as the left one and also had a massive palm. There were four fingers in total with thick talons on the fingertips that were as sharp as blades.

This right hand, much more deadly than the left hand, together with those four talons—

Hal made a realization. This was precisely Minadzuki's "horn counterpart" as a leviathan!

Kyuahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Immediately, white lightning erupted from the right hand's talons. Struck by the electrical attack, the Raptor stopped in the air. Presumably, it must have suffered a substantial shock.

At this time, Minadzuki continued to fly gracefully to close the distance to the Raptor.

Then she raised her enormous right hand and swung down forcefully with the four talons. This attack produced four lacerations on the lesser dragon's chest, splattering mercury-colored blood everywhere.

The Raptor wailed, unable to bear the pain. ROOOOOOAAAAAR!

The four giant sharp claws were used in the last attack.

Horn counterparts were commonly used to attack during battle. As organs, they could be considered a leviathan's "horns."

Like Minadzuki's *talons*, horn counterparts were especially striking in appearance for the most part.

After using its inborn weapon to suppress the Raptor, Minadzuki opened its mouth.

A blue-white heat beam was then released—!

This was a leviathan's second type of inborn weapon.

Wholly shrouded in the heat beam, the Raptor died instantly.

After the lesser dragon perished, its corpse crashed down from the air towards the ground.

Immediately, the remains underwent changes. The reptilian body gradually turned into *stone*.

The petrification started from the extremities, proceeding along the limbs, then the body, the long neck and the head in sequence.

Instead of rigor mortis, dragons would turn into stone after death.

Furthermore, the remains of dragons also became extremely fragile, making the tough resilience from when they were alive seem fictional. In actual fact, more than half of this Raptor's body shattered from the impact of the fall.

Watching the death state unique to dragonkind, Hal thought to himself.

Amidst the misfortune of a dragon attack, how lucky it was for all of them to survive unharmed.

However, what exactly was going on with his body? His prior embarrassing display looked almost like a panic attack from seeing a dragon...

The way things looked, his new life in Tokyo seemed on course to be filled with trials and tribulations.

Chapter 2 – Towards the Covenant Ritual

Part 1

The Juujouji home, where Orihime was born and raised, did not impose a *curfew*.

However, that did not equate unbridled freedom.

Although there was no set curfew, conversely, Orihime was obliged to decide by her own will and judgement the appropriate hours for a fifteen-year-old girl to return home then adhere to that time.

But on this day, she was quite delayed, failing to return home until 11pm. This was due to the dragon encounter at the uncomfortable Witch Mansion that she had sneaked into.

The first thing Orihime did as soon as she got home was to make her way to her grandfather's room.

Orihime walked slowly along the corridor, making her way through this wooden building that had been built a hundred a forty years back.

Only locals with insider knowledge were aware that the Juujouji home was a samurai residence. This naturally included a long corridor overlooking the entire courtyard and needless to say, the grandfather's bedroom, also serving as a study, was also a Japanese-style room.

The paper sliding door was open. Looking from the corridor, Orihime could see her grandfather sitting on a legless chair, the kind used on tatami floors.

"Grandpa, I have returned."

"Uh-huh."

After the dragon encounter, Orihime had already phoned home beforehand to explain the situation.

Consequently, she only used a simple greeting to announce her return while her grandfather also nodded with a brief response. But unexpectedly, the grandfather said with a solemn expression, "Even if there was an emergency,

don't you feel that you have returned a little late? Young ladies should take care to get home earlier, shouldn't they?"

Despite having passed the age of seventy, the grandfather's body was still highly robust.

This was apparently the result of his kendo training since youth. Furthermore, he used to work as a senior managing director at a certain automobile manufacturer and was a prominent figure hailing from a prestigious samurai family dating back to the Muromachi period. Old-fashioned in personality, he had a preference for traditional Japanese clothing.

Due to various reasons listed above, he always exerted an extraordinarily calm aura of pressure whenever he was feeling displeased.

However, Orihime answered simply without fear, "Don't be silly. Indeed, Minadzuki... Hazumi's 'serpent' did defeat the dragon, but it's not like I could immediately return."

"Hmm."

"Hazumi's body is very frail. I've heard that using her 'serpent' often leaves her confined to bed."

"But Orihime—"

"Feeling very worried, I went to check on her. Oh, she looks fairly energetic despite a bit of a fever, so I guess it's pretty much a relief."

"I-I see."

"And if dragons are attacking, the trains also get stopped, right? With that, of course I'll need to spend more time getting home than usual, won't I? After all, it's quite a long walk."

"In that case, you could have taken a taxi."

"During difficult times like these, things like taxis should be left for people who really need them. I'm healthier than most people and have the stamina. Walking a distance of four stations isn't really much. Besides, wouldn't taking a taxi be squandering money?"

"Your grandfather is willing to pay this bit of money no matter what!"

The grandfather had already lost his earlier composure.

Possibly because the household only consisted of the two of them, grandparent and grandchild, the grandfather would exhibit excessive protectiveness in certain areas. Despite the Spartan approach to education, he sometimes doted on Orihime very much.

"No. I can't be too wasteful of money I didn't earn myself."

"Ahem."

Probably feeling embarrassed, the grandfather cleared his throat and changed the subject.

"That organization has delivered a notice. The person presiding over the ritual is apparently ready and supposed to make a home visit in two days' time to explain various matters of importance. Make time for it."

"The ritual? Then I can finally become..."

"Yes, we have completed preparations fully on our side, so it's all up to you now."

The preordained occasion had apparently arrived. Orihime nodded vigorously.

"I understand. I will definitely prepare myself mentally—Oh, I already ate along the way because I was really hungry, so let's save tonight's dinner for breakfast tomorrow morning."

Dinner at the Juujouji family was prepared personally by the domestic helper every day.

Orihime seemed to want to finish as much of the food as possible to repay the domestic helper's labors. Come to think of it, how did the classmate she had encountered by chance handle dinner after what happened?

Leaving her grandfather's room, Orihime murmured to herself while walking alone in the corridor.

"I wasn't invited either."

After the battle, the Caucasian girl named Asya had complained "I'm hungry!" Hence, Orihime's classmate, Haruga Haruomi, had nodded and replied "Dinner together? Let's sneak into a place where we can prepare food." Then the two of them left.

Before leaving, all he said to Orihime was "See you at school."

"It felt like he was trying to avoid me... Am I thinking too much? I don't remember doing anything to make myself disliked. Rather, we haven't interacted much at all."

This classmate was quite "an eccentric" at first glance.

His aloof expression and tone of voice were especially memorable. Who on earth was he? Orihime's curiosity was piqued.

"So, Haruga-kun, could you tell me about yourself?"

"What the heck is this...?" muttered Hal in response to suddenly getting questioned by the classmate sitting next to him.

This was happening in the morning before homeroom, as soon as Hal entered the classroom and took his seat.

"Juujouji-san, did you happen to omit too much?"

"We're both in the same year group, so please feel free to address me by name directly. However, it feels impolite to use a boy's name directly, so I'll continue using the '-kun' honorific when addressing you."

"So, Juujouji, what do you want to know about me?"

Juujouji Orihime was evidently fearless in character.

Hal was certain she would make contact with him in some way today.

But to think it would be early in the morning, so suddenly... Curse this seating arrangement of neighbors. Also, Hal noticed something else—He had obediently addressed her by family name without honorifics just now.

Apparently, Orihime was quite adept at pulling others into her pace.

"First of all, I would be quite pleased if you could introduce yourself a bit, Haruga-kun."

"Japanese nationality, male, currently living in the Sumida ward. Title on my ID reads high school student. Is that enough?"

"What interests me are details from your profile that were omitted just now, Haruga-kun."

"Despite how I may look, I'm actually quite cautious in handling personal information. I'm fine with disclosing my height and weight to you, but give me a break if you want my three sizes."

"Relax, I'm not interested in that. Haruga-kun, I want to know about the knowledge you've acquired outside of school, as well as about what happened over there yesterday. However—"

Hal jumped in fright, because Orihime suddenly drew her face near.

Leaning forward swiftly, she turned her dignified and beautiful face towards him, looking him straight in the eye.

Hal was overcome with certainty. His compatibility with this girl was likely to be poor.

Truly a tricky case—To a boy like Haruga Haruomi who willingly chose to step into darkness, a girl like her, whose body and mind were composed wholly from elements of light, was a bit too dazzling to behold.

Rather, wouldn't it be better to say that just by having her beside him, he was unable to calm his mind? Or perhaps, he involuntarily wanted to avoid her?

"Are you trying to avoid me by any chance, Haruga-kun?"

Also, she was definitely not slow on the uptake. Extraordinarily sharp.

"Did I offend you slightly yesterday? If that is the case, I apologize. I am quite impetuous, which is why I unintentionally talked to others in that manner."

This girl was probably capable of being considerate of people around her. Last night, she even attempted to rescue Hal even in the face of danger.

Increasingly dazzling, increasingly troublesome. Hal sighed.

"Suddenly imposing these prying questions nonstop would be quite impolite. Today, I am just informing you of my interest in you. Let's chat again another time."

"Thank you very much for that..."

While giving a sloppy answer, Hal realized something.

A few classmates were staring in their direction with eyes of surprise.

A girl sitting ahead to the right, Mutou-san, and Funaki-san in the seat in front of her.

The two girls had apparently overheard Hal and Orihime's exchange by chance.

Orihime had engaged Hal in conversation with her usual tone of voice and attitude of cheerfulness. Sitting nearby, it was only natural for those girls to overhear.

Unconcerned, Hal did not feel compelled to do anything in particular about it.

Nevertheless, he would come to deeply regret his oversight at the time...

On this day, Hal found lessons to feel longer than usual.

This was probably due to his neighbor, Orihime, staring at him from time to time. After noticing her gaze, Hal could not calm his mind no matter what, leaving him no choice but to pretend not to notice.

Hal never expected such a day to arrive when he would become the target of attention from a member of the opposite sex...

Despite the strangely emotional response, Hal still waited single-mindedly for all lessons to end.

After school, Hal took care to avoid eye contact with his neighbor while hurrying to leave the classroom.

Quickly rushing off to the station, he then took the New Town Loop Line to Togashikomagata.

After a ten minute from the station and entering the Mirokudou located on the fourth floor of a multi-tenant building, Hal began to grumble:

"What rotten luck. Playing a student's role seriously, my foot. Humans are really not cut out to do things they're not used to doing."

The only ones present in the used bookstore, rarely frequented by customers, were Hal's acquaintances.

Namely, the store manager and SAURU staff, young Mr. Kenjou, as well as Hal's childhood friend, Asya.

"What's the matter, Haruomi? You don't look like you feel well."

"Of course I don't feel well. I originally intended to keep playing my part as the ordinary boy who doesn't make an impression for a while longer before withdrawing from school at an opportune moment, but now I've attracted weird curiosity from others..." replied Hal, who then scratched his head rudely.

"Despite your dignified, elegant and dreamy appearance, Asya, you're like a ravenous wild beast at your core and ultimately, I get along best with you after all. Things are so easy when I don't need to respond with full effort."

"Putting aside the issue of getting along, I am personally quite appalled by your malicious slandering!"

"Anyway, let's move on. Kenjou-san, I must have contracted a mental disorder, right? Look, there were inexplicable symptoms of a panic attack earlier. A performance of Dr. Freud's nonsensical drama must surely be playing in the depths of my mind."

During the dragon encounter, Hal had experienced full-body paralysis and hallucinations.

Although Asya had accompanied him to the hospital afterwards for a medical check, all tests came back with "normal" as the result, including psychiatric ones.

Even so, Hal still insisted strongly he had developed post-traumatic stress disorder.

This was partly due to wishful thinking. Otherwise, it would be difficult for him to accept that sudden and unnatural ataxia.

"As a result, I want to leave Tokyo temporarily and take this opportunity to undergo therapy. Could you help me explain to Hiiragi-san?"

"Well, that's certainly sudden. Don't you need to help Miss Asya?"

"That's a very good point. Come on, you should have sought my opinion too, at least."

Following up on what Kenjou mentioned, Asya pouted, looking very displeased.

She had presumably seen through Hal's intentions of "using this as an excuse to escape Tokyo."

"Oh dear, think about this. It'd be a pain if these symptoms interfered with work, not to mention massive trouble at school. That's why I think it'd be a good idea if I could go somewhere far away to relax for a while."

"Please act a little more Japanese. You should be exhibiting the spirit of hard work even more at times like these."

"Well, personally, I believe that an escapist solution like spending four years or so at a tropical island is quite suitable for young people."

Just as the two youngsters were starting to argue, Kenjou interrupted in a nonchalant tone of voice, "Excuse me, but a job is already arranged. Please give up on your plans to escape Tokyo for now."

"A job, you say... Now that's quite sudden," murmured Asya in response to the sudden notification.

"Actually, we were hired quite some time ago to help conduct a ritual. However, the matter was delayed repeatedly because our side was unable to locate a Grave Good for the covenant ritual. The client seems to be both rich

and well-connected. During the call yesterday, they said they have secured the artifact already. Hence, it should be smooth sailing from this point onwards."

The two new members never expected this type of job to fall upon them in the first place.

One of the two, Hal, slumped his shoulders. On the other hand, Asya immediately smiled radiantly.

"Fufu, surely you can't waste a rare chance to make money? Let's shelve the matter of relocation until this job is over. Does that work, Haruomi?"

"It'll be a pain if cancelling a job at the last moment tarnished my reputation. Naturally, moving house will have to wait."

Next to the elated Asya, Hal muttered, "The ritual candidate... I don't suppose her family name is something fabulous like Juujouji, is it?"

"Bingo. I never knew you were that knowledgeable about matters on our end."

Hearing Kenjou's impressed response, Hal shrugged.

Rather than knowledgeable, he had merely predicted a probable development.

Recalling the profile of Juujouji's dazzling face, Hal could not help but feel an urge to sigh towards the heavens.

Part 2

"So this is the situation. I am Haruga from SAURU."

"This time, it seems like it's my turn to go 'what the heck'..."

It was 6pm the following day after Hal was informed of the urgent job.

This conversation took place between Hal and Orihime after they met in the Juujouji residence's Japanese-style room.

Asya and the client, apparently Orihime's grandfather, were also present on the side.

Orihime was slightly displeased. The reason could easily be surmised. Most likely, it was due to Hal trying his utmost to avoid her in school today, then suddenly making a home visit afterwards.

But whatever. Because explaining would be a pain...

"Orihime, is this someone you are acquainted with?"

"I am classmates with your granddaughter at school."

Hal answered swiftly. He had entered his business mode that was 30% more friendly than his usual self.

"So you are a high school student too?"

"Yes, but please rest assured. I believe my profile has already been delivered to your hands. There is not a single erroneous fact. To date, I have succeeded in nine cases of Grave Goods acquisition while there were four occasions when I served as staff during successfully completed rituals. These are my total accomplishments over the past three years."

Orihime eyed Hal suspiciously while he was talking nonstop with a fake smile.

This was probably because she knew how different he was acting compared to usual, but Hal pretended not to notice. Gaining trust of the client—more accurately, the representative—was the most important.

"Furthermore, I am merely playing an assistive role on this occasion. Anastasya here will be responsible for carrying out the ritual and providing security. Information on her has already been sent to you, yes?"

"Indeed. Master-class... Is that so?"

Witches—magi—were precious talents. There were probably fewer than a hundred and fifty of them in the entire world.

Among them, the majority belonged in the range of Level 1 to Level 3, but witches reaching Level 4 or above, designated "master-class" by SAURU, were extremely rare.

In particular, Asya was one of only eight Level 5 witches in the entire world. One could definitely call her a person of exceptionally rare talent.

"How astounding for someone in possession of such power to come expressly to Tokyo..."

Asya smiled back modestly in response to the gaze of Orihime's grandfather.

In order to impress her dream-like beauty deeply upon others, she nodded lightly and bowed.

"Although I sometimes receive exaggerated praise, I have simply had more opportunities to take part in battle than other witches."

Her choice of words were very polite but conveyed unwavering confidence.

Excellent, wonderful acting. Well done. Hal secretly praised her.

Asya was undoubtedly playing the part of an incomparably calm and mysterious version of herself. Part of the act was not sitting cross-legged in a Japanese-style room despite being a foreigner.

Instead, she was sitting very straight and formally in seiza.

Although such behavior did not resemble a foreigner's, it served as a foil to Asya's fairy-like beauty, hence it was absolutely the superior choice.

Back when his childhood friend first came to New Town, Hal had discussed with her over a meal of grilled meat.

Henceforth in Japan, Hal was going to be in charge of the talking during "business" while Asya's job was to play the role of the reticent and mysterious character, thereby leaving a good impression on sponsors. If the client could be persuaded to relax standards of scrutiny and remunerate more generously, life would be much easier during work.

Still, it felt truly ludicrous to be discussing the topic of mysteriousness in a grilled meat restaurant amidst smoke and odors...

"First of all, I wish to dedicate my humble efforts towards making Orihime-san our new comrade. Please count on me."

Asya promised while pretending to be a precocious prodigy.

This type of image manipulation usually worked when securing the support of layman sponsors.

It went without a hitch this time as well. Orihime's seemingly very strict and old-fashioned grandfather looked impressed with Asya's behavior of calm confidence, closing his eyes slightly and nodding.

"I see. Then I place my granddaughter in your hands."

"...?"

Orihime tilted her head in puzzlement, probably because she had witnessed Asya yelling "I'm hungry!" without pretense the day before yesterday.

After all, she must find it suspicious how different Asya was from her earlier impression.

"Then allow me to explain the details of the ritual."

Before Orihime could say anything, Hal changed the subject.

"As you already know, humanity was forced to coexist with dragonkind in this century. Thus, the existence of 'serpents' became gospel to those who worry about the security of neighboring areas. Namely, those created through the ancient knowledge known as magic... the giant creatures named leviathans."

Artificial monsters created by magic to oppose the dragons.

Witnessing their existence, the media called them "leviathans" in reports, even making up the nickname "serpents" for these super lifeforms.

"Using an alchemical process only privy to SAURU, the ritual creates the physical body of the 'serpent' then links it to the candidate girl through covenant magic. If successful, she will become the leviathan's partner, in other words, a mage."



おなが
かが

空きました

?

The word "mage" originally referred to a "user of magic."

But in modern times, the most outstanding magic practitioners were leviathan covenantees. Hence, referring to them as "magi" became spontaneously entrenched.

"Making use of their power for public benefit, magi became the protectors of human settlements. This you should already know. As for terms of service and remuneration, please negotiate with local authorities and sponsors—"

"Hold on, Haruga-kun. May I have a moment of your time before we start the long discussion?"

"We are talking already. I don't think there's any need for an additional moment or anything like that..."

Orihime had angrily interrupted Hal's explanation, prompting him to respond with the above.

He tried to avoid eye contact with her as much as possible, but the slightly agitated young lady counterattacked swiftly, going straight to the point.

"I want to talk alone in private. Cut the irrelevant nonsense and come with me!"

Orihime's soft palms forcefully grabbed the collar of Hal's school uniform. Due to coming here straight after school without changing, Hal was still in uniform.

On the other hand, Orihime had already changed into casual clothing. Forcibly pulling Hal up to his feet, she dragged him to the corridor.

Her formidable strength did not quite match her attire, a white cardigan with a flared skirt.

Consequently, before Asya and Orihime's grandfather could even react in surprise, Hal was already taken captive.

Part 3

Hal was taken to a place serving as an interrogation room. By all guesses, a girl's bedroom.

A Japanese-style room. In the corner was a desk where a number of textbooks were placed, the same ones Hal was using.

Hanging on the wall was a uniform from Kogetsu Academy's high school division. Naturally, it was a girl's.

In addition, there were a number of small articles and furniture fitting for a girl's room...

"Sit down anywhere you like. This is my room, so make yourself at home."

Orihime's words verified Hal's suspicions.

The room was very pretty with very sufficient sunlight, but somehow made Hal felt uncomfortable. He sat down cross-legged whereas Orihime took her seat in front of him using formal seiza posture.

Her back was very straight, an indication of her excellent upbringing.

"Okay, now that it's just the two of us, put away all those formalities, reservations, weird courtesies and business jargon so that we can talk openly and upfront."

"On the other hand, I think the things you just deemed unnecessary are essential for smoother communications between people, no matter what."

"Perhaps that may be true, but right now, we don't need them. After all—"

Orihime placed her hand on her chest.

Although Hal only realized now, she was really quite an attractive girl.

"Haruga-kun, we are classmates and friends. Furthermore, we know each other's secret."

"Hold it right there. Disregarding the other two claims for now, what do you mean by 'friends'?"

Ignoring the charms of the girl before him, Hal made a displeased look.

"I don't think we have built up that deep an interpersonal relationship yet."

"Well, we've already spent a week in the same class. Two days ago, we even experienced a life threatening crisis together. After that, we've also chatted a bit about various things."

On the other hand, Orihime had made an astounding declaration in her usual cheerfulness.

"If not friends, what would you call our relationship?"

"..."

I can't believe you consider us friends just because of something on this level.
Hal almost wanted to grumble aloud.

Also, he noticed something. Just now, Orihime had most likely omitted on purpose—About how she had selflessly exposed herself to danger in the face of a dragon in order to rescue Hal back then.

...Despite knowing she would gain a psychological advantage had she brought it up.

Hal had no evidence. He was simply guessing blindly.

However, Orihime really seemed like a girl who would unobtrusively act considerately for other people's feelings.

Even though she clearly said "put away the formalities" herself...

"Fine, putting words like 'friends' aside for now, I accept your point about being open and upfront."

Truly a tricky customer. Why was she so dazzling? Hal continued with vexation in his heart, "Then what? Why do you want to talk to me?"

"Didn't I mention before? Because I am very interested in you."

"It might sound a bit trite coming from myself, but I'm not that special a person. On the other hand, Asya who came along is quite amazing. I'm simply someone who accepts jobs from the SAURU organization, running errands to provide various kinds of assistance to covenant rituals."

Hearing Hal speak truthfully from the heart for the first time, Orihime made a skeptical look.

"Simply the fact that you're in this line of work as a high school student is already weird enough. Doesn't it require special knowledge or ample experience? I get the feeling you're very familiar with things related to dragons and magic, Haruga-kun."

"This job has no age restrictions. Just as you described, because it's a profession requiring special skills, age isn't much of an issue."

"Then from where did you learn those skills?"

"The answer is very simple. It's my family business."

Family business? As Orihime murmured softly in curiosity, Hal continued, "My father was a member of SAURU too. He was part of the research group that confirmed the theory of 'serpents'—the synthesis of leviathans and the process of covenanting. Pops taught me a lot while I also read the materials at home, so that's how I gradually gained expertise in this field."

"Your father..."

"Besides, regarding the point of age restrictions, magi enjoy even greater freedom. In short, all you need is to be a *girl*. Asya became a witch back when she was ten and you're a girl too."

Orhime could only be described as a young beauty in terms of age. Hal said to her:

"Furthermore, at such a young age, you have been recognized as an eligible mage candidate, receiving massive support from local society and about to establish a covenant with a 'serpent.' The fees paid to SAURU on this occasion also come from industrialists, capitalists, religious organizations and others that are based in Tokyo."

Orihime's grandfather was the client this time.

However, he was nothing more than the representative for the project of cultivating Orihime as a mage.

There should be many others who have dedicated money and effort for her sake.

"You visited the library at the Mansion last time. That was for the purpose of acclimatizing your body to magic, right?"

"Yes. The 'serpent' will not grow in strength unless I do that."

"The power of a 'serpent' depends on 'how acclimatized to magic' the mage with whom the covenant is established. Even if it's just for getting used to that kind of space, which is filled with mysterious energies, it's still excellent training for a novice mage."

"I think I've heard that before. But I've been there a number of times and still haven't grown accustomed to it yet..."

"If you wish to respond to the expectations and investments of the sponsors, then endure it. But to be frank, I don't think you're cut out to be a witch."

"How so? Am I actually not talented enough?"

Although Hal had said something that could be construed as an insult, Orihime's response turned out to be very respectful.

Presumably, her true nature must be very upstanding and not twisted in any way.

"Rather than talent, it's a question of temperament."

"...Perhaps I look too much like a lady, by any chance? Despite appearances, I'm actually a tomboy at heart. Especially as a modern kid, I'm more skilled in physical than verbal fights, so I'm actually quite strong at fighting. I think there's no problem even if I have to fight dragons."

After hearing this confession that could not be ignored, Hal could not help but stare off into the distance.

"Come on, words like 'tomboy' or 'modern kid' are already outdated in twenty-first-century Japan, right? Using such a retro choice of words is really quite fitting for a sheltered high-class lady like you. Besides, your 'strong at fighting' confession is really urging me to make a snide remark. However—"

Glancing aloofly at Orihime who seemed airheaded in certain ways, Hal said, "That's not where the issue lies. You are too upstanding, too wholesome... It's impossible for you to share your soul with 'serpents,' the close relatives of dragons."

"Wholesome?"

"Yes. Using the analogy of light and darkness, something like magic would be darkness. Using the analogy of the sun and the moon, it would be the moon. Someone like you, Juujouji, who exudes an aura filled with light from the bottom of your heart... probably cannot get acclimatized to magic."

"Won't it work if I devote time towards training? I am very tenacious, you know?"

"Will it? You just said that you didn't get used to it despite visiting a number of times, right? Perhaps you already know instinctively. There's a decisive conflict between the dark knowledge occupying that place and the personality of Juujouji Orihime."

Indeed. It was the same incompatibility as that between Haruga Haruomi and Juujouji Orihime.

That was what Hal thought to himself, but Orihime said nonchalantly, "Then you're probably overthinking things, Haruga-kun... Rather, you're overestimating me. I am not as devoid of darkness as you say. To be honest, I'm quite resentful that you've been avoiding me all the time lately, Haruga-kun."

You call something of that level "darkness"? Hal smiled wryly. Orihime proceeded to ask him:

"Then pray enlighten me as the expert, Haruga-kun, what kind of personality is suitable for becoming a witch?"

"Someone who embraces darkness in their heart. Someone whose very soul harbors a certain type of insanity. Their thought processes are impossible to fathom using a normal person's sensibilities. As far as I know, all master witches—those Level 4 or above—fit the aforementioned description."

"But... Since you say that, what about her? Your friend, Haruga-kun."

Orihime was probably trying to recall that girl's name. With a labored expression of pondering, she said, "Asya-san, if I recall correctly? She looks so delicate and dream-like, giving off such a frail impression. But she's a very powerful witch, isn't she?"

"Bullseye."

Hal expressed great approval of what had caught Orihime's eye.

"Asya only looks weak superficially. As for her true nature... Well, perhaps it'd be appropriate to describe her as a beast. She's a ferocious beast in human clothing!"

"A ferocious beast—in human clothing!?"

"She seems to have preserved the bestial instincts that many modern humans have lost during the process of evolution. That's why... She is so compatible with the primitive and primordial aspects of magic as a type of knowledge."

So-called magic was a profound field of expertise. However, knowledge and intelligence alone were not enough to master it.

Only those with mental strength and sensibilities transcending conventional boundaries were able to attain greatness.

"Asya's body and mind easily grew accustomed to the path of unorthodoxy. She is more vicious than anyone in combat and definitely barbaric, almost rivaling the dragons. That already makes her an unprecedented monster."

"W-Wait, Haruga-kun, how could you describe a girl in that manner!?"

While Hal was praising his childhood friend nonstop, Orihime stopped him for some reason.

"Did I say something weird just now? I was simply lavishing praise on her talent."

"It sounded nothing like that at all!"

"Totally! O-Of all things, you're comparing me to animals, beasts and monsters! Haruomi, what do you take a young maiden in her prime to be!?"

"Hmm?"

Hal felt concerned about the yelling coming from outside the room.

Orihime also tilted her neck in puzzlement before reaching for the paper sliding door separating the bedroom from the corridor. The door slid open with a clack to reveal Asya eavesdropping with her ears perked.

"...What are you doing?"

"...I just wanted to find out a little about what Haruomi and Orihime-san are discussing."

Asya explained, trying to play dumb.

At the same time, she turned her face to the side, avoiding eye contact with Hal.

"This isn't trying to find out a little. You're simply a suspicious character engaging in eavesdropping."

"I couldn't help it. It's all because you two are acting so sneaky with such a suspicious atmosphere! Orihime-san's grandfather seems very worried too!"

The childhood friend was yelling loudly, true to her original nature. The feigned temperament of the calm young lady was no more.

In response to her carelessness, Hal frowned and replied "That's why I keep saying you're too careless in business, Asya." Then he noticed Asya's last sentence, one that he could not ignore—Her grandfather is very worried too?

Closer examination revealed that Orihime's grandfather was currently standing behind Asya.

His facial muscles were twitching nonstop, as though suppressing certain intense emotions.

"You are Orihime's classmate at school, aren't you? I have certain things to say to you."

"Oh, sorry about that. I'll immediately resume the explanation about the ritual."

"I don't care about that right now. The most important matter at hand is this: you are the first man to ever step into my granddaughter's room."

"Eh? Is that true, Juujouji?"

"I only realized now that it was mentioned, but it does seem to be the case."

"I can't believe a young man and a young woman are spending time alone in a bedroom, it's truly too immoral. This type of behavior is the breeding ground for impure interactions between genders!"

"Yes, indeed. To stop you from abusing your classmate position to deceive my granddaughter, I must teach you a good lesson. Could you accompany me briefly?"

Asya was yelling loudly whereas the old man spoke calmly with a tense face.

Orihime's face froze in disbelief while Hal was confronted with new troubles.

Orihime's grandfather spent roughly two hours warning Hal about the "Juujouji family's ban on impure interactions between genders."

The process not only dragged on but was also unnecessarily detailed. That being said, Hal never even entertained the thought of making a move on Orihime.

After he voiced his opinion, Orihime's grandfather ended up taking offense again.

"You are saying that... My granddaughter is unattractive as a woman? That is truly an insult!"

Only after placating the old man with much difficulty could the discussion on the ritual finally resume.

Then when leaving the Juujouji residence, Asya inexplicably grumbled "I can't believe you're aiming to please a girl whom you've only met recently without even evaluating your own abilities!"

Handling Asya also took a very long time.

It was currently after 10pm. Utterly exhausted, Hal made his way home on his own. Then roughly five minutes away from his messy house—

Hal felt someone's gaze. On the dim road at night, a girl was staring at him with a sardonic smile.

Roughly aged eleven or twelve in appearance. Her facial features were very delicate. A cute girl.

However, her attire was quite strange. A scarlet kimono. Tied on her lustrous black hair was a large scarlet ribbon. Perhaps this girl already developed the same retro tastes as Orihime's grandfather at this age?

"...Who are you?"

Hal asked with suspicion on his face, because she could not possibly be an ordinary child.

If his eyesight was not mistaken, she had suddenly appeared out from the shadows in the road under the cover of night. It was almost like teleportation...

"For a mere human to possess a star's fragment... You have involved yourself in a troublesome destiny."

The girl in the kimono spoke quietly in an arrogant tone of voice.

Although her voice was as young as her appearance, there was a calmness in tone that did not match her age.

"Star, you say?"

"Are you unaware? It is the fragment of the flint star pouring flames into the conqueror's secret runes. Despite being followers of the unorthodox path, contemporary humans are rather lacking in depth of research. What a sad sight indeed."

The girl had clearly mentioned "followers of the unorthodox path."

In other words, she knew that Haruga Haruomi was involved with SAURU.

Hal then noticed at this moment. The girl's eyes had golden pupils and felt a little reptilian. Unmistakably, this was the same pair of eyes he had encountered last time at the Mansion's library!

"Discovering you in this city was truly fortunate from my standpoint... But I am as yet unsure of your capacity. Let us chat again should an opportunity arise in the future."

The girl smiled with conceit then said quietly:

"However, let me offer you a word of advice. At the current rate, you will surely die in the near term. If you wish to live, then go search deep into the ground where even the wings of dragons cannot reach. Then again, who knows if such a place actually exists in this world!"

Finishing with these words, the girl vanished as suddenly as she had appeared.

Hal had evidently crossed paths with a supernatural being. Furthermore, the encounter was accompanied by an ominous prediction of death. Perhaps all this implied—

"What happened to me was not a mental disorder... but some kind of curse or haunting?"

Uncharacteristically, Hal mumbled to himself in a daze.

Part 4

"I'm so sorry for yesterday. My grandfather was acting very strangely."

It was the next day after the visit to the Juujouji residence, before homeroom started, inside the classroom at morning.

After Hal took his seat, Orihime, who had arrived first, suddenly apologized.

"You don't need to apologize. I wasn't offended. It just gave me a fright, that's all."

"Grandfather is usually quite strict but becomes over-protective in weird areas. In any case, I am very sorry for causing you additional trouble, Haruga-kun, even though it was a rare occasion for you to visit my home."

Chatting with a neighboring classmate in the morning was probably a very common scene in school.

But why? The surrounding students were suddenly clamoring.

The two girls sitting diagonally ahead, Mutou-san and Funaki-san, exchanged glances. Sitting up front, a boy—Takayama—stiffened his back with a crack.

Am I overthinking things? Despite a feeling of doubt, Hal still answered, "Every family has their own problems. I really don't mind what happened yesterday."

To be honest, the PTSD-like symptoms last time were more serious of a problem.

That really was a "curse," right? A single thought prompted thousands more thoughts to fill Hal's mind... Unaware of the troubles Hal was confronting, Orihime cheerfully said, "So here is my gesture of apology. Don't be shy, feel free to accept it."

What Orihime presented was a convenience store bag. Hal leaned forward to peer inside.

"Your apology for yesterday is only worth two Chinese-style steamed buns? Your sincerity is truly impressive, Juujouji."

"Not both of them. The caramel macchiato strawberry custard bun is mine, Haruga-kun, while yours is the ginger sauce grilled meat kimchi green tea bun. Oh, please do share your thoughts after trying it. Although I'm very curious, I really couldn't actually bring myself to try that one."

"Your fully sincere response truly fills me with awe..."

Hal reached his hand into the convenience store bag.

He frowned at both the colorful product that seemed as though it was developed in resignation by a Japanese convenience store chain as well as Orihime who was nonchalantly shoving this brightly colored object on him.

Instead of the pink bun, he tried bringing to his lips the orange bun whose hue was so intense that it looked poisonous.

"It's not exactly disgusting... But the flavor is as disharmonious as a symphony orchestra without a conductor."

"As one would think, I can't expect the feeling of security I get from the standard flavors... Actually, I originally thought of buying a meat bun and a bean paste bun, but it'd be bad if you turned out to be the kind of rebellious youth who totally scoffs at safe brands, Haruga-kun, so I decided to take a gamble."

"On the topic of food, I am just a boring guy, so plain and ordinary is good enough."

"Understood. If another chance for me to treat you comes up again, I'll try to apply what I learned from this experience."

Using her hands to break off a piece of the bun that looked like it was sickeningly sweet, Orihime gracefully delivered it to her mouth.

Meanwhile, Hal finished his bun in merely four bites. Seeing that, Orihime said, "Haruga-kun, would you like to try some of this? The excessively sweet caramel is slightly addictive. But this sweetness isn't quite normal. Rather than people with a sweet tooth, it feels more like they're targeting those with a sugar dependency."

Orihime extended a small piece of her bun.

Although this image greatly resembled an "Open up and say ah~~" kind of scene, Hal replied indifferently, "Each person should take responsibility for finishing off their own portion."

Classmates chatting casually should be a commonplace occurrence in any school.

However, Hal noticed presently that his earlier feeling was not his imagination. The surrounding classmates were all staring at him in surprise. Why was that?

"Say, Haruga... You seem to be getting along quite well with Juujouji-san..."

The boy sitting in front, Takayama, remarked resentfully, prompting Hal to retort with indifference, "You're mistaken. Juujouji is a straightforward girl who treats everyone the same. I just happen to be in her company as a matter of

circumstance. However, I'm timid in personality and can't keep up with her friendly ways, so I wouldn't really call it getting along quite well."

"You, timid in personality, Haruga-kun? You must be kidding!?"

Orihime exclaimed in surprise. Hal took the opportunity to assert strongly:

"Not lying here. Can't you tell just by looking?"

"Who can tell? On the other hand, I feel like you're an exceptionally thick-skinned person, Haruga-kun."

"And you seem to be excessively upstanding."

"You are right. However, I'm not a straightforward person who treats everyone the same. I hate people who are rude or pretentious the most."

"But those kinds of people get hated by others, not just you, right?"

"H-Hold on! Haruga-kun and Juujouji-san, can I confirm something with you two first!?"

Interrupting the conversation was the girl who sat diagonally in front, Funaki-san.

She had stood up from her seat and jogged her way over to just before Hal and Orihime.

"A couple days ago, Juujouji-san said she was interested in Haruga-kun, didn't she!?"

"Yes, I did say that. Then this person started avoiding me, but after many things happened, Haruga-kun finally revealed his true colors."

"Didn't I already say so? I am shy and timid in personality."

"Liar, you simply find interpersonal relationships to be a hassle. That's just laziness."

Hal was secretly impressed. Orihime was sharp as expected, cutting straight to the point.

On the other hand, Funaki-san's eyes glowed energetically as she proceeded to ask again:

"In the past few days, you two have rapidly grown close. Next comes the second matter. Haruga-kun, you visited Juujouji-san's home yesterday, right? Did you meet her family at the time?"

"Yeah. But due to certain reasons, Juujouji later dragged me into her room."

The instant Hal gave an immediate response, the atmosphere in the classroom suddenly changed.

Why was that? Anger, resentment and jealousy were appearing in the eyes of the boys who were listening intently in the surroundings. Meanwhile, the girls were all looking this way with heightened excitement as though they were about to scream "kyah!"

As for Funaki-san, she was nodding with satisfaction.

"Now for the third matter! What were you doing, Haruga-kun, visiting Juujouji-san!?"

"Sorry, I don't want to answer. Please allow me to remain silent."

"Then Juujouji-san, if possible, could you tell me!?"

"Hmm... No, I can't tell you. Let it be a secret between the two of us. Also, I don't think it's something that can be disclosed to unrelated people."

"Understood! Then I won't pursue this matter any further!" promised Funaki-san, still with a happy look on her face.

A few days later, not only Hal but also Orihime regretted this scene.

Within a mere span of a week, rumors started spreading.

Completely unfounded and strange news was circulating in the high school division of Kogetsu Academy.

'Exposed: romantic relationship of Juujouji Orihime, the most popular beauty in the school.'

'Surprising! The one who took initiative to confess was the Princess (school slang referring to Orihime)!?'

'Her alleged boyfriend is likewise a first-year. Why would the Princess like such a gloomy-looking guy!? If hatred could kill, that guy must surely be ranked first on a "want to kill the most" poll! ✕surveyed population: all male students.'

'The only man who ever stepped foot into the Princess' bedroom. We will never forgive him. Never.'

'Verification 1: since family was involved, nothing should have happened, right?'

'Verification 2: do not be overly optimistic. All boys of the school, now is the time for resolve.'

'The alleged boyfriend completely denies rumors of a romantic relationship with the Princess. Is he lying? Or being tsundere? Or is he gay?'

'Further reports: the Princess also denies of a romantic relationship. However, the shadow of doubt continues to hang over the entire affair. Has springtime arrived for the school princess who was an attainable goal for everyone? The entire male student body is crying!'

Hearing that the situation had developed into this state, Hal could not help but think—

Why was everyone spinning themselves in circles over erroneous information whose truth could not be confirmed, getting all worked up for nothing?

Since it was far too unexpected, Hal did not even get a chance to take precautions.

"In other words, that's how massively popular Juujouji is."

Hal muttered with poignant feeling.

"I'll be careful starting next time. I have to avoid carelessly talking to girls whom an indeterminate number of boys treat as virtual romantic partners as though they were worshiping idols."

The current location was the deserted rooftop of the school building. Orihime was standing before him.

They had come here because the gazes of bystanders were too aggravating when they tried to talk in the classroom or the corridors.

"I clearly denied them so many times, but why won't the rumors calm down!?"

Orihime angrily clenched her fist and complained.

"Haruga-kun and me—How impossible!"

"Is it really okay for you to assert 'how impossible' in my presence? My feelings such as male pride are a bit hurt."

"Eh? Is that how you feel about me by any chance, Haruga-kun?"

"Nope. Because I've already experienced for real the kind of risk involved in getting into that type of relationship with you. It's troublesome beyond compare."

"Say, isn't it rude as well to call someone 'a girl who is very troublesome to get into a relationship with' to her face?"

Orihime instantly retorted against Hal's slip of the tongue. Hal shrugged.

"Sigh, let's put that aside. Even if you continue to go around and deny rumors, it'd still be futile. Just wait calmly and quietly for the rumors to settle down. Toleration is the best course of action."

"...Hmph, you're talking like it has nothing to do with you."

Orihime stared intently at Hal after remarking nonchalantly.

Hal secretly felt surprised. Judging from her tone of voice, it sounded like she had already seen through his intentions.

Discreetly withdrawing from this school within a month, leaving Orihime to endure on her own... That was precisely his irresponsible plan. Hal decided to change the subject.

"By the way, the ritual's schedule is already decided. It'll take place at night, three days later."

"...Got it. Finally, the official start is here."

Ritual. Of course, that referred to the ritual for establishing a covenant with a leviathan.

Confronted with this sudden notification, Orihime's face tensed up.

"But you mentioned last time during the explanation, right? A single misstep during the ritual could lead to a great disaster, so it's necessary to choose a wide open and uninhabited space as the venue. Has the specific location been decided yet?"

"Yeah. Based on the criteria, that place is the most suitable in this area."

Places that happened to meet all criteria required by a covenant ritual...

Such locations were normally not easy to find. However, there was a most suitable plot of land near Tokyo New Town—the Tokyo Concession that had become uninhabited.

Hal and Orihime's destination three days later was going to be a cluster of ruins in Old Tokyo.

I hope that symptoms of that mysterious curse or PTSD won't break out before the ritual concludes successfully—Hal felt compelled to pray to God whom he had never believed in.

Part 5

Then on the night three days later...

Hal, Orihime and Asya were gathered in front of the Ryougoku Bridge spanning the Sumida River.

Crossing the river would take them to the area of Old Tokyo.

Although the Kuramae, Umayu, Komagata and various bridges crossing the Sumida River were not guarded by security, they were completely sealed off.

Furthermore, this Ryougoku Bridge was sealed off even more securely than the other bridges.

Not only did the bridge have a gate, but there were also security guards stationed twenty-four hours a day.

This entrance was used by police-related vehicles patrolling the area of Old Tokyo.

Gazing into the distance on that side, Orihime suddenly murmured, "Clearly it's dragon territory but humans are responsible for managing it. It's so strange."

"Those guys didn't demand 'concessions' for the purpose of living in them. They just wanted to build *that*."

Hal pointed into the night sky extending across the opposite shore of the Sumida River.

The wasteland of a city on the far bank was shrouded entirely in darkness without any activated illumination.

But due to the complete absence of artificial lighting, the moon and the stars seemed even brighter, their gentle white light shining on the ground surface.

Against this "illuminated" backdrop of the dark night, a *pillar's* silhouette was visible.

It was the Monolith standing in the center of Old Tokyo, an imposing pillar of black stone, rising over a kilometer in height.

"The surroundings of that pillar... have changed."

"Changed?"

"Yes. Magical, spiritual and mysterious energies, miasma... That place is filled with such energies belonging to the path of unorthodoxy. Whether water, soil or air, everything has become different from that of ordinary land."

This time, it was Asya's turn to speak to Orihime who was staring in wide-eyed amazement.

"Commoners can only stay for a month before the strong magical power becomes unbearable, causing their bodies severe discomfort. Conversely, there are also advantages to land where magical power has increased."

"What you're implying is... land that facilitates rituals like this time's, right?"

Seeing her potential junior, Orihime, comprehending, Asya suddenly smiled.

"A correct answer. For a large-scale ritual like a leviathan's birth, the spiritual and magical energies residing in the soil must not be overlooked. Hence, tonight—"

"That is why we came to Old Tokyo to find a place with strong spiritual energy."

The magical power in the soil waxed and waned depending on weather, seasons and leyline conditions.

To check magical power conditions tonight, Hal took out his oft-used *pocket watch*.

"What is that?"

"My tool of the trade, it's called the Clockwork Mage."

Answering Orihime's inquiry, Hal lightly lifted up in the silvercrafted pocket watch.

This was the memento he had discovered in his father's study soon after returning to Tokyo New Town. An old-fashioned mechanical watch with hundreds of turning parts such as gears, winders, springs and oscillators.

This was the Clockwork Mage. Also a modern version of a mage's wand.

Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock. The sounds of the second hand counted out intervals of time.

It needed to be synchronized with his heart rate. Hal adjusted his breathing. Right now, the second hand's rate of movement was almost identical to his pulse.

The watch hand and his heart. Hal imagined both of them moving with the same rhythm.

Tick-tock, badump, tick-tock, badump.

Hence, the second hand slowed down slightly to reach the exact same rhythm as Hal's heart. In that very instant, magical power was generated.

A supernatural power that commoners were not supposed to be capable of generating.

"I've heard that in the Chinese art of geomancy, Feng Shui, it is very important to capture circulatory flows in the ground—dragon pulses. Try using this principle to observe the flow and distribution of magical power."

Hal spread out an aerial photo of the Old Tokyo area.

This photo was apparently taken from the air. Holding a red pen in his right hand, Hal drew a number of circles on the map. What guided the pen's movement was not Hal's own will.

Instead, it was the spell of Leyline Exploration performed using the clockwork device's magical power.

Naturally, the circled locations all held strong magical power.

"Is this one okay? I also get the feeling that it's a wide open space."

"The Ochanomizu neighborhood? Got it. Then let's go there."

Hal immediately nodded in agreement with Asya's comment after she examined the map and the circles.

On the other hand, Orihime was staring at the pocket watch with eyes full of curiosity.

"Although I've heard of this type of device, it's actually my first time seeing one. So with this in hand, even commoners can use magic?"

"Naturally, it doesn't work unless the holder understands magic to a certain extent."

Hal put away the pocket watch and said, "This thing allows me to perform magic up to Rank B5, so it's not bad as a portable tool. Anyway, let's hurry and get moving."

Having said that, Hal turned his gaze to the light motor vehicle parked on a nearby road. It was a car owned by SAURU that he had asked Kenjou to deliver here.

"Hold on, a car is all fine and good, but who's going to drive it?"

"It's a bit late to be asking this kind of question."

"Don't worry. Neither Haruomi nor I have any trouble driving."

Confronted with the issue Orihime had pointed out, Hal shrugged whereas Asya answered readily.

"...According to Japanese laws, people under the age of eighteen shouldn't be able to obtain a driver's license. Also, you're in my year group, Haruga-kun. Did you ever repeat grades in school?"

"No, Juujouji, I was born in the same year as you. I'm still a young and tender fifteen-year-old."

"Somehow it feels really wrong to hear Haruomi calling himself young and tender... Oh by the way, I'm only fifteen as well, like everyone here. A girl who outblooms even a flower."

"Say, Asya, didn't you ravenously wolf down a large amount of edible chrysanthemums or some other kind of flower earlier?"

"Umm... I'll be blunt then. Do either of you have a license?"

Orihime asked with a very melancholic look on her face.

She looked like she was worrying about what to do, as if she had discovered a reserve army of criminals.

Hence, Asya puffed out her flat chest and took out her driver's license with a giggling smile.

"That's what you're worrying about? Just as you can see, my preparations are impeccable."

"I'm fine too. Despite requiring a bit of money to acquire, it does come in handy for various situations henceforth. I've already obtained a Japanese driver's license."

Hal also took out his license. However, Orihime reacted with an expression of shock.

"Anastasya Kaminsky. nineteen years old. Haruda Harunosuke, eighteen years old. How exactly should I comment on the names and dates of birth that differ from what I previously heard..."

"Oh—Let me explain for your information. There exists a type of profession in this world where people will prepare all sorts of documents for you as long as you're introduced through friends and provide a reward."

"Their help was frequently necessary when I first started this line of work."

"Also, the only forgeries here are the licenses. Our skills are totally legitimate."

"As for driving experience, Haruomi and I once took turns driving through the Taklamakan Desert in a military jeep, following an oasis that went across the desert. Please rest assured."

"I'm not concerned about driving skills. It's the issue of suspicious, forged licenses!"

After getting the surprised Orihime seated in the back of the light motor vehicle, Asya squeezed into the front passenger seat while Hal sat down as the driver. Starting the car, he stepped on the gas pedal.

The car gradually approached the gate on Ryougoku Bridge used by police vehicles.

Although the research organization of SAURU did not secretly control the Japanese government as suggested by urban rumors, they did maintain intimate ties to many state organizations.

The date-stamped access pass was already prepared.

The access gate's appearance resembled a highway's toll station. However, what blocked their path ahead was a very sturdy looking fence. A police

officer, in his late thirties approximately, was on standby before the gate, hence Hal stopped the car in front of the gate and extended his pass out of the window.

After glancing over the pass, the police officer returned it to Hal and operated a switch.

...Accompanied by the sound of turning machinery, the fence gradually rose up.

Thus Hal and company entered the former Yasukuni Street, a road from Ryougoku to Shinjuku, traversing the former capital in times past before it became a wasteland.

Driven by Hal, the car advanced smoothly.

Traveling along the former Yasukuni Street, the car passed through Asakusa Bridge and the district of Higashi-Kanda.

However, everywhere was deserted. The hustle and bustle of innumerable cars and pedestrians of the past had all vanished. Naturally, there was no street lighting either. Apart from their car's headlights, the only remaining light sources were the moon and the stars.

Along the way, the trio witnessed a tragic scene in the district of Iwamotochou.

"They sure rampaged to an unbelievable degree."

"Abandoned immediately after the destruction wrought by the dragons, I guess..."

Orihime concurred with Hal's comment.

A flock of hungry dragons had probably flown in back then. Skyscrapers, multi-tenant buildings, ordinary family residences, public facilities, warehouses, factories, shops—The whole city was pulverized, torn apart and incinerated until nothing was left.

Various types of construction materials were scattered all over the place as rubble and debris.

Fortunately, none of the remains were enough to constitute road obstacles. Without needing to take detours, the trio continued to advance.

"If left alone to rampage, Raptors—this goes the same for the lesser dragon flying in last time—are capable of destruction that's no joking matter. Even more so for elite dragons. Speaking of how terrifying they are... I don't even want to give them any thought," remarked Asya lightly, seated next to the driver.

The beauty of her fairy-like face was mixed with a warrior's solemn dignity, like a renowned sword that had been sharpened. She often displayed this type of expression whenever matters of power and battle were brought up.

"You previously mentioned those elite dragons, Asya-san? How are they different?"

Her curiosity piqued by Asya's remark, Orihime proceeded to inquire of her soon-to-be senior.

"Well... Elites are more than double the size of Raptors and very powerful in combat strength. Apart from that, they're also well-versed in many languages."

After a moment of thinking, Asya began to explain.

"This includes Sumerian and Coptic languages, Ancient Greek, Latin, and various languages used by modern humans. There's also their own language, Hyperborean, as well as the runic symbols of Ruruk Soun which are said to have gathered all magical wisdom possessed by dragonkind... In addition, elites have very strong magical power, making super high-level magic as easy to perform as breathing for them."

"You mean magic like the spell Haruga-kun just used?"

"Nowhere close. Magic of ours on this level cannot compare to that of the dragons at all. However, witches and leviathans are able to control magical power on a similar level as them."

"But even if power level is the same, there is still a gap in magical proficiency and experience... To be honest, I wouldn't want to fight them at all unless my side outnumbers them four to one or more."

Asya's combat record was supposed to include several occasions when she had fought elite dragons.

After hearing the sincere opinion of Asya who had survived these deadly encounters, Orihime remarked with heartfelt emotion, "Then if I became a witch as well, is it possible I might have to fight those elite dragons?"

"Chances are not low. If it's just Raptors, even ordinary military can oppose them. But elites can use magic to disable mechanical parts and disorient people on the order of tens of thousands... Hence, no one can handle them except for witches with leviathans."

"Also, elites often wander the earth in search of things like precious metals, rare metals and foci bearing magical power."

Experts like Hal and Asya seldom referred to Raptors as "dragons" because somewhere in their hearts existed a certain mindset—Ultimately, the only true dragons were the elites.

After listening to them, Orihime nodded greatly and said, "Speaking of which, is that red dragon an elite too? The one you can often find on internet videos, making speeches in fluent English—Oh right, Hannibal!"

The giant red dragon had flown to the Rockefeller Center twenty-odd years ago.

Since his self-introduction was simply "I am the king and representative of dragonkind," the people of Earth gave him another nickname. Namely, "Hannibal."

The name of the famous ancient Carthaginian general who had ravaged the Roman Republic in the past...

Hal exchanged a glance with Asya then quickly responded, "Of course. In our world, that guy is the most famous of the elites."

"By the way, Haruomi, any update on that 'mental disorder'?"

"It hasn't recurred again, at least for now. But I've been thinking, perhaps it's actually due to something like haunting or a curse."

"Now that you mention it, I do recall that it's quite possible for us to encounter those beings due to work..."

Then there were those classified as Caesar Draconis, commonly known as "dragon kings."

They were the irregulars reigning supreme at the top of the elite dragons. However, it would be premature to discuss this topic with a newcomer who had yet to become a witch...

Unaware that Hal and Asya were secretly withholding information, Orihime began to show interest in the new subject of conversation.

"H-Hold on, what do you mean by a curse?"

"Nothing much, just the symptoms that broke out during the dragon encounter last time. In the beginning, I thought it was something like PTSD but there are many aspects worth pondering over."

Hal recalled the situation when he had encountered the mysterious spirit(?) while explaining, "In my family's case, I've had past experiences because Pops and I often suffered retribution when visiting places like ancient tombs. Speaking of which, Pops died all of a sudden when his health failed without warning."

"I think it's best that you pay the SAURU headquarters a visit to get diagnosed."

"All kinds of things really can happen in your line of work, Haruga-kun..."

By the time they noticed, their car had already reached the vicinity of their destination.

The neighborhood formerly known as Ochanomizu...

Although situated in the heart of the city, this area was unlike commercial and business districts. In the past, there were many universities and hospitals here. The location that caught Hal and Asya's eyes was also a certain university's campus.

Their car stopped in a corner of the parking lot located inside the university's back entrance.

After getting off, Hal and Asya immediately started preparations.

First, Hal clutched his pocket watch tightly to perform Altar Formation magic.

As a result, blue light suddenly appeared from the ground of the vast open space. At the same time, complicated shapes, letters, numbers and symbols were being rapidly traced out one after another on the ground.

This was the magic circle used for carrying out a ritual of Leviathan Birth.

Then Hal pulled a trunk case out from the car and took out the Grave Good inside.

An ancient mirror, polished from white copper. Hal had no idea whether it was found in a shrine or a museum somewhere, but it definitely felt very historical.

Hal placed this white copper mirror in the center of the magic circle.

In technical parlance, an artifact like this mirror would be called the "magical apparatus for enshrined object emulation."

Once the covenant ritual was completed, it would become the leviathan's core—the Heartmetal—and start functioning as the cardiac organ of the super lifeform closely related to dragonkind.

"Okay, with this, the altar's preparations are done."

"I'm ready on my side too. The connection to the New Town branch office is secured. We can start any time."

Asya reported while facing a notebook computer connected through a satellite cellphone.

Orihime jumped in surprise. With an impressed look, she was watching Hal and Asya in action.

"Eh, you're already done? Not even ten minutes have passed since we got off the car."

"Nothing of that sort. Haven't you waited for a very long time before coming here? Also, counting back, more than half a year has elapsed since we came to Tokyo. During this time, Juujouji, Istanbul's SAURU headquarters has been making many preparations for you."

"That's right. Not only does the composition formula for the 'serpent' need to be calculated and the required magic circle designed, but adjustments are also needed to accommodate the Grave Good your side prepared."

Asya spoke while operating the computer.

"Via a direct line at the New Town branch office, this terminal is currently connected to the Wizard's Clock at the Istanbul headquarters... as well as 'Grandmother Immortal.' Although only Haruomi and I are present here, even more people are currently on standby for this ritual."

A look of respect and admiration appeared on Orihime's face after she was told the situation. Hal also chimed in to say, "Juujouji, your task is to just wait a little longer. Look carefully at the shadow of the 'serpent' that will be born for you... Okay, Asya, counting on you now."

"Very well—O mother of the immortals, I hereby invite on your behalf the priestess who shall inherit your soul!" chanted Asya sonorously while facing the giant magic circle.

Astoundingly strong magical power was erupting from her delicate body.

A task requiring Hal to use a clockwork device to perform was accomplished by a witch with just her heart. Every time the childhood friend's chest pulsed, magical power flowed out endlessly.

Furthermore, a vast amount of magical power and ingenious spells were being transmitted from the Istanbul headquarters.

Bridging both sides was an electronic version of the Clockwork Mage that was installed in the notebook computer together with the satellite cellphone, first connecting to Tokyo New Town's Mirokudou through the cellphone's signals then reaching the Istanbul headquarters through a high-speed direct line.

Evaluated in terms of transmission bandwidth, this communications channel would probably be considered very slow.

However, this was a magical ritual.

No matter what form taken, magic was able to construct a spiritual bond known as the Astral Link as long as the person in the priestly role carrying out the ritual was mutually connected to the Istanbul headquarters.

Even if the medium was wireless or a conventional phone, in the end, the same result could still be obtained.

"O queen who gazes down on all creation with the eyes of the great sorceress, O noble advisor who possesses infinite wisdom."

"You are the one wielding authority. By your pale and noble hands, heaven and earth is nurtured, guided and shaped."

"O queen and sovereign who purifies rivers and makes water flow. We worship your divinity and pledge our allegiance. O mother, I implore you to grant her your protection and confer your guidance!"

In response to Asya's chanting, the "shadow" on the magic circle gradually grew larger.

It was the black silhouette of an enormous beast. Quadrupedal and mammalian in form, its overall physique was slender. What was it shouldering on its back?

This shadow was the materialization of the leviathan about to be born.

Orihime murmured with eyes wide in surprise, "So that's a 'serpent'... The leviathan born for my sake...?"

"Indeed. But it's still unknown whether the birth will succeed since it's currently just a spiritual body that's still unable to manifest in the present world... A shadow 'serpent,' that's all. Juujouji, if the covenant's bond fails to connect your body and mind to that thing, it will remain stranded in the present world—"

Halfway through the explanation, Hal was stunned with surprise. Flames?

Suddenly, Hal's field of view became dominated by fire without warning.

Burning. The altar where the ritual was taking place, Asya chanting sonorously, Orihime looking up at the shadow nervously, the scenery of the wasteland in the distance, everything was set ablaze.

Was this the illusion of flames he had experienced before? Hal was struck with unease.

Last time when he saw these flames, there was a Raptor nearby. Could it be possible that this time as well—However, there was not the slightest dragon's shadow in sight. Neither could the presence of dragons be sensed...

Hal frantically surveyed his surroundings but blocked by the flames, he could not see clearly.

"Damn it, get out of the way!"

Hal roared angrily. The intensely burning flames instantly vanished without trace.

Hal's forceful vigor had dispelled the mysterious hallucination—Was that the conclusion to be drawn? Hal found it strange but kept looking around him. There were no signs of dragons nearby.

"What's the matter, Haruga-kun? Is there a problem?" asked Orihime in worry from her position next to him.

However, Hal was too preoccupied to answer her. Holding the pocket watch, he invoked the magic of Enemy Search.

Immediately, guided by magic, he turned around exactly 180 degrees.

Amplified to telescopic levels, his vision captured a certain shape. At first glance, it resembled a large bird.

A Stellar's sea eagle or similar bird? Or one of the rare birds of prey inhabiting the mountain forest near the city?

But he was wrong. It was comparable to an eagle only in size but completely different in form.

"How on earth..."

Perched on some school's roof, the lifeform was gazing down at the altar—

A winged dragon. The scales on its body's surface were bronze in color.

It seemed to have noticed Hal's gaze. Flying leisurely through the air, it descended gracefully towards them. Unmistakable.

Realizing the dragon's true identity, Hal managed to make a sound with much difficulty.

"Halt the ritual, Juujouji and Asya. The most terrifying monster has appeared—
An elite is flying at us!"

No dragons existing in the world were actually this small in size.

Even the Raptors, known as lesser dragons, were typically over five meters in body length. However—

Hal recalled what had been explained to Orihime just earlier.

—All elite dragons were masters of magic. For them, Miniaturization magic was probably no different from child's play.

Descending gracefully, the bronze dragon was undoubtedly an elite dragon—
scientific name: *Equus Draconis*—that had miniaturized itself!

Chapter 3 – Revived Flames

Part 1

"As an endless traveler hailing from dragonkind, I hereby offer all of you my greetings."

The small bronze dragon landed lightly on a streetlight like a bird of prey.

This lighting equipment was never going to light up again. However, the moon was especially clear tonight and fully substituted for the streetlight's function.

The voice emitted by the dragon was both clear and intellectual.

"Using a pronunciation easier for your comprehension, my name is Raak Al Soth. Although my dealings with you shall conclude in an instant, I do hope that every one of you will remember my name firmly until the final moment."

"Rather than conclude, you are going to terminate..." muttered Hal quietly.

His heart felt like it was about to explode from terror.

Elite dragons were capable of cursing humans to death with nothing but a stare.

Nearby, Orihime and Asya who had interrupted the ritual were both staring up in wide-eyed shock at the dragon. However, Hal's childhood friend stiffened her expression further when she saw the dragon speak.

Since Asya was a witch who had survived countless battles, this reaction of hers most likely stemmed from personal experience regarding the threat posed by elite dragons.

"Next, race that is more closely related to apes than snakes..."

The dragon Soth was speaking in a calm voice that did not match his curled up body.

"May I mutter to myself for a little while? Until a few days ago, I was still in slumber. Does everyone here know that hibernation periods exist for my race?"

Well, using your calendar system, it means slumbering continuously for *several years*."

Unbelievably, there was a sense of humor in the dragon's tone of voice.

Humor was a sign of intelligence.

However—Hal frowned. No matter how much mental cogency and powerful magic they possessed, the true nature of dragons was ultimately that of terrifying creatures.

"We get a little excited when coming out of hibernation. Trivial things can turn into stimulus provoking me to attack the ground surface and revel in the joy of violence and destruction."

At this rate, the dragon was undoubtedly going to start a fight—

Hal signaled with his eyes to Asya who nodded lightly in response.

"But right now, another bad habit of mine is bothering me. Once provoked, I cannot suppress my vice of avarice no matter what. Excuse me, everyone, but I wish to rob you of that treasure there. Would you allow me to do so?"

Treasure. The dragon was probably referring to the white copper mirror Hal's group had brought.

Compared to Raptors, elite dragons experienced a much stronger desire to gather precious metals, rare metals and objects carrying magical power.

Previously, Hal had called Asya "a beast in human clothing"—

However, elites were "demonic beasts wearing guises of intellect." The real thing instead of a metaphor.

While Hal and his group were so shocked that they gasped, the dragon Soth spread his wings and hovered into the air.

Then he suddenly started to expand. Within the blink of an eye, the physique that was almost the size of Stellar's sea eagle extended itself to a giant body ten-odd meters in length.

Enlargement—No, this was the dispelling of Miniaturization magic.

The elite's gigantic body spread its pair of wings wide, blocking moonlight from reaching the ground.

"Hold on! There is no need for you to rob us. If you want this thing, just take it!" declared Orihime suddenly without warning while she stared sternly at the dragon.

"Although I've heard that it's very expensive... In the end, it's just an object."

Under Hal's surprised gaze, this was the answer Orihime gave. If a single mirror could exchange for the trio's lives, there was nothing worth agonizing over. That was probably what went through Orihime's mind. Her beautiful face was filled with acuity.

"And aren't you an expert in finding objects like this one, Haruga-kun? I just need to hire you to find another one, so losing the mirror isn't regrettable at all."

At the end, her lips twisted stiffly in an effort to force a smile.

Even while resisting the pressure brought about by a giant elite dragon, she was still forcing herself to smile and trying not to let Hal and Asya worry too much.

Damn it. For some reason, Hal really wanted to click his tongue.

Why was this girl making a full display of her dazzling aspects so frequently?

And why must someone like her be sent to the front lines to fight dragons that were impossible to measure with common sense?

After all, this deal proposed to the dragon would ultimately—

"Do not get the wrong idea, girl. I said 'I wish to rob' and have no intention of profiting without labor."

As expected. Hal gnashed his teeth.

This was his first time encountering an elite dragon up close, but as an "expert," he was already familiar with the belligerent and sadistic nature of their race.

As though corroborating his knowledge, the elite dragon Raak Al Soth laughed.

"I wish to trample you viciously together with that shadow of an *imitation* you have created, thereby satiating my avarice! For us dragons, there is no greater joy than conflict, extermination and devastation! Hahahahaha!"

Soth laughed while flapping his wings.

Instantly, a raging gale swept forth, blowing the trio over backwards.

Then there was the shadow behind Hal's group.

The leviathan about to be born—the shadow of a quadrupedal beast—was blown and scattered by the wind, vanishing like a mirage!

"M-My serpent!?"

"Dispel... He used a countermagic spell! Watch out, Juujouji—Urgh!?"

No sooner had he issued a warning, Hal knelt down. That was because his legs suddenly lost strength.

In the corner of his field of vision, Hal could catch a faint glimpse of red *flames*. The hallucination seemed to be acting up again.

Was he still unable to overcome it?

"Haruga-kun!"

Like last time, Orihime rushed over to him. That girl never minded her own business nor feared for her own life.

Why did she choose the path of shared destruction instead of abandoning deadweight? Just like last time, Hal burned with fury at his own ineptitude.

However, the only difference in situation this time was Asya's presence.

"I pray to the ancient divine seal of purity!"

She was chanting a song of summoning, a hymn for calling forth her partner, Blue Rushalka.

"Send the transient blue dragon to the ground! Let the star of purification manifest over our heads!"

Responding to her call, a shining pentagram materialized in front of Raak Al Soth who was hovering leisurely in midair with wings spread out.

"Fufufufu, of course I noticed. Girl sacrificed to the accursed race deserving of death, the smell of an *imitation* is hanging over you—"

The belligerent giant bronze creature's voice was filled with joy.

"You lot are precisely the prey that I seek, the enemies who truly ought to be crushed! Very well, hurry and summon it!"

"I'll do that even without being told by you! Fight alongside me once more, Rushalka!"

Responding to Asya's call, the light constituting the pentagram transformed into a "∞" shape.

Immediately, the "∞" then turned into a blue magical beast.

A dragon without front limbs. Sprouting from the shoulders was a large pair of long wings. Spreading its wings ferociously and leaping into the night sky of Old Tokyo was precisely a "wyvern."

The surface of her body was light blue with a blue mane on her head.

Furthermore, a long horn protruded from her forehead.

A blue wyvern with a single horn like a unicorn—

Asya's partner, the "serpent" Rushalka, had materialized.

Rushalka's build was slightly smaller than Raak Al Soth's. Elites and "serpents" were almost perfectly matched in physical size and abilities.

Kyuahhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Rushalka roared loudly and flew, hurtling straight towards Soth ahead.

Her massive body was very agile. There was even a sense of lightness to her movements. Despite clearly being a gigantic monster, Rushalka was moving around with great fluidity of motion and speed.

Closing in within an instant, Rushalka stabbed her forehead's lone horn at Soth's body.

This horn would be considered her "horn counterpart."

But speaking of agility, the elite dragon was in no way inferior at all. Relying on bestial reflexes, Raak Al Soth instantly reacted.

That being said, he was not taking any evasive measures—

"O secret runes of Ruruk Soun, turn into my mysterious shield!"

Accompanying the incantation, defensive magical power was spread out.

Soth's gigantic bronze-colored body was surrounded by cuneiform script that was hard to tell if it consisted of characters or patterns—They also slightly resembled symbols from an alphabet. These symbols numbered almost twenty.

Kyuahhhhhhhhhhh!

Moving her long and sharp horn, Rushalka stabbed.

However, the alphabet surrounding Soth blocked her direct flying charge.

Despite reaching merely meters from stabbing the target, the *horn* was unable to advance!

"That is rather strong for an *imitation*. Looks like I have to exert myself to handle this opponent using my sluggish body newly risen from slumber!"

Soth roared loudly. Despite complaining about exertion, he seemed quite happy.

Then he slowly and calmly spread his wings, gradually rising in altitude.

Whether dragons or leviathans, neither lowered themselves to flying via the inelegance of hastily flapping their wings. Spreading their wings wide as

though they were the sovereigns of the sky, they soared through the air by expending magic. Such was the style of these creatures.

After reaching sufficient height, Raak Al Soth opened his mouth and breathed blue flames diagonally downwards!

This was the Fire Breath that had incinerated many of humanity's cities.

The mighty flames were descending on Rushalka from overhead. Using her own nimble agility, the blue wyvern should be able to evade the attack through flowing motions like a meandering river, but—

"Rushalka!"

Asya shouted to relay her orders to her "partner."

Magi and "serpents" were connected by telepathy. Just by shouting loudly or thinking silently with concentration, the covenantees were able to transmit their will.

At this moment, Asya was probably thinking "Protect us!"

As a result, Rushalka held her position in the air, blocking Soth's fiery explosion directly.

Because she could not dodge.

Otherwise, the flames would end up reaching the ground, incinerating the trio of Hal, Orihime and Asya until nothing was left.

Kyuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!

The one-horned "serpent" roared in pain but the surface of her blue body was unharmed.

Soth's flames were not powerful enough to defeat her—At least, not yet.

"Fufu, the flames inside me are still not hot enough, apparently. But this problem shall be solved soon enough. *Imitation*, give me a good fight until then!"

Soth's fully confident voice was heard from above.

Indeed. The power of the attack just now was clearly weak compared to the standards of flames discharged by elite dragons. Having just come out of hibernation, Soth probably needed warmup exercise like a human athlete.

Once his body—the flames inside him—were sufficiently fired up, his attacks ought to become even stronger.

Furthermore, elites also had the option of using magic to raise the power of their flames.

Raak Al Soth still had yet to bring out his true power.

On the other hand, Asya and Rushalka...

"Don't worry... Your body should still hold for now. I will sustain you, so please endure a little longer, Rushalka..."

The use of "still" on both sides was diametrically opposite.

Despite being in the middle of an intense battle, Asya was calling to Rushalka in a gentle voice.

Upon closer examination, one could see what appeared to be small dust-like particles crumbling and falling away from Rushalka's massive body. The blue wyvern's physical body was gradually falling apart.

After persistently fighting battles all over Europe, the "serpent" had suffered incurable injuries.

Asya's partner, Blue Rushalka.

Hal last saw her a year ago, but Rushalka had evidently passed the peak power of her prime.

Flying in the air above Old Tokyo were Raak Al Soth and Rushalka.

Soth was flying even higher.

This relative positioning also happened to reflect their difference in combat strength.

Having trouble even standing steadily, Hal found his field of vision dominated by *those flames*.

Whether the university campus they had been using as the altar or the moonlit sky where the dragon and the snake were fighting, everything was shrouded in flames. In addition, his heart was beating rapidly and he could not muster any strength in his back and legs.

Perhaps this was the end for him.

Hal sighed then said to Orihime beside him, "...Juujouji, things look bad right now, so you'd better hurry and escape. That dragon is currently interested in Rushalka only, so you might be able to escape if it's just on your own."

Part 2

"Haruga-kun, what do you mean by that?"

"Just solving a simple arithmetic problem. Since there is the option of one person surviving, of course that's better than all three of us getting killed," explained Hal indifferently to Orihime who was glaring harshly at him.

Meanwhile, he was sitting collapsed on the magic circle he had constructed earlier for the ritual.

High in the sky, Raak Al Soth was flying while shooting flames confidently at the ground. And Rushalka was blocking them with her body.

Soth probably intended to gradually increase the flames' heat by shooting them continually.

Whenever the flames seemed like they were about to end, he would start spewing them out again the next instant.

In order to protect Asya, Hal and Orihime on the ground, Rushalka could not dodge. Although she could still endure for now, time seemed to be running out. Hal said, "Getting back to New Town on foot is tough and very dangerous... But compared to getting killed by that elite, it's probably not much of a trial. Also, it's less likely you'll be spotted compared to moving in a vehicle."

"Don't be silly. If I'm going to escape, I'm taking you with me, Haruga-kun."

The rational suggestion was rejected by an impulsive declaration.

How stupid. Although Hal was quite skinny in physique, he was no baby.

A girl as slender as Orihime could not possibly carry him on her back.

"I don't know whether you've been afflicted with a mental disorder or Taira no Masakado's curse but I'm not shameless enough to run away and leave behind someone who's like a patient. Doing that would surely weigh unbearably on my conscience, causing me to acquire a mental disorder instead."

Despite understanding that this choice would lead to her own demise, she still adhered nobly and faithfully to kindness.

Hal sighed. In fact, he had already predicted this.

Considering the Princess here, this sort of answer was very possible.

Despite the hallucinations tormenting him, Hal still turned his gaze to the sky.

Rushalka was engaged in a desperate battle against the elite dragon's Fire Breath. However, seizing the instant of interruption in the opponent's flames, she finally counterattacked.

"Rushalka!" commanded Asya.

In that instant, Rushalka exhibited great fluidity in motion.

She suddenly flew as smoothly as water flowing down in accordance to elevation.

A rapid ascent with astounding calmness.

Nevertheless, the speed was as fast as lightning. Using just an instant, Rushalka closed in and arrived in front of Soth, then she stabbed her single horn at the elite dragon's neck.

If the neck's center could be pierced, perhaps a critical wound might be inflicted.

Relying on bestial reflexes again, Soth twisted his neck to one side and avoided the horn's attack. What a shame.

Still, the desire to seek victory was amazing in refusing to miss tiny openings so as to counterattack.

Within Hal's flame-enshrouded view—

Asya's elegant face was filled with acuity and solemnity, truly awe-inspiring.

Although the young maiden was as delicate as a fairy or an antique doll, only at times like these during battle did her image rise to her most beautiful, looking like a painting.

"...If she were like this all the time, perhaps I might even fall for her..." murmured Hal in mesmerization.

If his childhood friend emerged victorious just like that, there would be no problem.

But on further thought, it was just a hope of fantasy. Hal secretly prepared himself for the worst.

"Haruomi is really in bad shape..." murmured Asya, glancing at her childhood friend collapsed on the ground. Haruomi did not possess the power to fight dragons to begin with, but he was a boy who was used to such battlefields.

The witch candidate from the client's side and her childhood friend—Neither could be allowed to die.

Committing her resolve, Asya glared at Soth.

Meanwhile, her "serpent" Rushalka had just taken the opportunity to attack Soth with her horn. Now, Rushalka had flown back to above Asya, waiting in the air to prepare for the next exchange of attacks.

Asya nodded. Using guerrilla tactics would be best for now.

It was not yet time to instigate a close-range brawl.

Biting the enemy's neck while wrestling with each other...

Such crude tactics were only applicable when the opponent revealed more openings. Right now, what she ought to do was—

"Rushalka, form an enclosure using pseudo-divinity!"

Asya threw out one of her trump cards. Namely, allowing Rushalka to use magic.

Kyuahhhhhhhhhhh!

The wyvern-shaped blue serpent cried out shrilly.

As a result, the concrete below was split open as a violent torrent of water gushed out from within.

Rushalka had summoned a pillar of water. This water pillar divided itself into two along the way. The end of each water pillar took on the shape of a snake's head, wriggling restlessly like a slithering snake's.

Simply stated, the large amount of water bursting forth had transformed into a giant *two-headed snake*.

The two-headed snake of water extended its long necks to form a circle, surrounding Rushalka all three hundred and sixty degrees like a barrier.

With this, the continual attacks of fiery breath earlier would no longer be a problem.

The snake of water was constituted using the pseudo-divinity of water.

A water deity's power was capable of suppressing flames and sealing away evil powers. The water snake's heads were guarding on Rushalka's left and right respectively.

Leviathans were able to invoke magic rivaling that of elite dragons.

Namely, *pseudo-divinity*, the trump cards of witches like Asya.

"Don't attack yet, Rushalka. Right now, prioritize protecting yourself and us," whispered Asya softly.

In Rushalka's current state, she was unable to muster the kind of destructive power required to suddenly charge the elite dragon and rampage all the way to the end. In that case, persisting in thorough defense was the better choice.

Let Soth attack if that was what he wanted. She was going to wait like this until the opponent grew tired and presented a opening.

Once the opportunity arrived, she would aim for that bronze-colored throat—

"Fufu, I never knew an *imitation* could lead its own minions!"

Looking at Rushalka and the *two-headed snake*, Soth snickered.

"A tough fight indeed. But what a shame that you are injured. Originally, you could have amused me by using many more fancy tricks..."

He had seen through the fact that the enemy side was not at peak condition. Asya frowned.

The number of times that a "serpent" could invoke pseudo-divinity was dependent on the partner. Asya was a Level 5 witch.

This implied that she possessed the power to "order the use of divinity five times a day."

Originally, she should have chosen to use spells at an earlier opportunity.

But she only used it this late due to considerations for the burden it would impose on Rushalka.

Invoking divinity would greatly reduce the lifespan of the "serpent" whose days were already numbered. Restraint was necessary to use her partner's remaining life with effectiveness.

"This rare strength and resilience has been compromised by injury? Truly a shame and quite a mood killer. Know that this is my very first prey after coming out of hibernation!"

There were many among elite dragons who adhered rigidly to their own peculiar aesthetic sense.

Asya could not help but feel suspicious while recalling that fact. What exactly was he trying to say?

"O dim-witted Jabones, respond to the summons of the Zizou, explorers along the path to kingship."

Soth chanted an incantation. As a result, shooting stars suddenly appeared in the night sky.

A number of lights were descending on the earth from satellite orbits.

This was not a sudden meteor shower. Nowadays, dragonkind had built a number of colonies on satellite orbits and the moon's surface where large numbers of Raptors—lesser dragons—inhabited.

"Are you summoning minions too!?"

"Mmm-hmm. Didn't I say that my mood was killed? The winged lizards shall serve as your opponents."

Streaking across the sky, the meteors landed between Soth and Rushalka.

Roughly thirty in number, they were all dragons smaller than Rushalka. Descending from the sky were steel-colored lesser dragons, Raptor Draconis.

Indeed. Elites were able to magically summon groups of lessers, commanding them as they pleased!

Before their eyes were the non-sentient Raptors, pure beasts. Normally, they would attack Rushalka without any leadership or tactics but this time, things were different.

The Raptors surrounded Rushalka in an organized fashion, forming a net of encirclement.

Following Raak Al Soth's directions, they were taking combat action as an army.

"Then I shall excuse myself... Allow me to claim the treasure."

Leaving the battlefield to his minions, Soth slowly and calmly spread his wings.

The elite dragon's gaze was cast down onto the magic circle on the ground, the white copper mirror located at its very center—In other words, the divine artifact that had caught his eye.

Just as Asya clicked her tongue to engage the Raptor group in battle—

Haruomi suddenly took unexpected action.

Just as he had feared, numerous Raptors had flown in from the sky.

Hal sighed. It looked like he had no choice but to try out *that* plan. Because it was a very uncertain challenge, he really wanted to avoid using it unless necessary—

Hal strained to use his right hand, which was having trouble moving freely, to search the interior of his waist pouch.

Inside was a folding knife. Taking it out, Hal flicked out the knife edge.

—Hal had dispelled the state of paralysis and hallucination of flames before by pure vigor alone.

In that case, let's try it again. Hal gripped the blade hard with his left hand.

"Ow... It really hurts!"

"Hold on, Haruga-kun, what on earth are you doing!?"

Naturally, his left palm was cut open and dripping with blood.

Frightened by Hal's sudden act of self-mutilation, Orihime looked into his face with worry.

In that very instant, Hal's field of view became clear, no longer shrouded by flames. The pain had driven away the bizarre hallucination.

Orihime's pale face looked very clear and distinct. His legs... were now able to gather strength.

Hal said to the beauty who was up very close, "You seem to have forgotten this. If any accident occurs during the ritual, protecting you is part of the job we are undertaking. Not doing my job properly is unacceptable..."

"Eh?"

Hal finally stood up with difficulty. Leaving the surprised Orihime behind, he stumbled his way to the pedestal set up at the center of the magic circle and grabbed the white copper mirror on top of it.

This was the Grave Good provided by the client to be used during the covenant ritual to become the Heartmetal.

Hal proceeded to drag himself unsteadily into the driver's seat of the light motor vehicle. Turning the key in the ignition, he started the engine.

"Sorry, I'll be taking away the thing you want!"

Hal opened the car window and yelled to the sky. A taunt directed at the elite dragon.

As a result, Soth went "Hmm?" in the air, a little surprised. He never expected to hear such a declaration from Haruomi whom he acknowledged as nothing more than a monkey.

"Oh?"

Hal could feel Soth's gaze piercing him and the car.

By this point, his heart still felt inexplicably afraid. Rushalka was surrounded by over thirty Raptors. Judging from the current situation, he could not expect his childhood friend's assistance for now.

Hal made eye contact with Asya on the ground again.

The childhood friend nodded lightly. She understood Hal's intent.

However, it was nothing so amazing that one would call it intent. After all, Hal was just taking action in reckless abandon.

The current situation was almost hopeless.

By taking away the "treasure" that had caught the elite dragon's eye, it would be great if he managed to divert Soth's attention.

It would be even better if Soth sent several Raptors to chase him. It would not be much, but at least Rushalka's burden could be lessened somewhat.

Then after that, what awaited Hal was probably a tragic fate.

But at least it would be a thousand times better than getting crushed by those dragons. In addition, making a desperate struggle like this might perhaps lead to survival...

Rather than relying on magic, Hal and his childhood friend simply communicated their thoughts to each other through silent mutual understanding.

(I'm counting on you, Haruomi. But I don't intend to say a final farewell to you here!)

(The same goes for you. We must live on no matter what.)

Asya nodded as though saying "go" and blinked with determination, absolutely refusing to say goodbye, displaying a warrior's calm solemnity—

All this served to clearly express the childhood friend's thoughts.

She was probably reading Hal's inner thoughts in a similar manner.

Hence, Hal floored the car's gas pedal without giving Asya another look.

"Haruga-kun! Using yourself as bait is way too reckless!"

He could hear Orihime's voice. The Princess had apparently realized Hal's intentions.

Hal remained convinced that she was not cut out for great accomplishments as a witch. But perhaps just as she claimed, she might turn out to be unexpectedly talented in fighting. Such were the rude thoughts crossing Hal's mind.

Heeding Orihime no more, Hal drove the car to leave the scene on his own.

Departing from the university campus that had turned into an altar then a battlefield, the car sped along the sloped Hongou Street.

First, Hal drove south to the former districts of Ōtemachi and Marunouchi. He decided he would abandon the car after pulling ahead some distance, then escape into the wasteland...

Fortunately, Hal was very familiar with the geographic environment.

Although he did not visit very often, this was his hometown after all.

Hal and his father were both members of SAURU who made a living relying on magic. There were several occasions in the past when he had to hand in

research reports to headquarters, thus requiring him to infiltrate the Tokyo Concession where magical power exceeded normal parameters.

Even without looking at a map, Hal could still remember major roads and shortcuts.

If things went smoothly, he ought to have ample chance to escape with his life—

"What!?"

Just as Hal was persuading himself with optimistic speculation, he jumped in fright.

Reflected in the rear-view mirror was a flying object that was closing in at a leisurely rate.

The bronze dragon was flying with confidence, his wings spread out in leisure while he chased after Hal.

Without rising in altitude, he was flying courteously above the traffic lanes.

Soth was most likely doing this to make Hal realize the fact that he was being chased. It was possible that Soth wanted to go on a hunt.

Hal had not expected Soth to come chasing after him as the leader—

If it were a single Raptor, he might have been able to use magic to escape by the skin of his teeth!

Soth was evidently serious when he declared himself weary of Rushalka and Asya. Then opening his jaws wide, he was undoubtedly planning to breathe out fire.

Part 3

Hal's light motor vehicle was passing by Ogawamachi and speeding along Hongou Street.

This was an unrestricted race without any need to heed legal speed limits or concurrent traffic. Hal floored the gas pedal without hesitation, racing at full speed.

However, this was quite dangerous behavior.

After all, no one could predict what kinds of obstacles had fallen on the abandoned vehicle lanes. He should not let his speed exceed a certain threshold.

In fact, during the trip here, Hal had driven sluggishly at an average of less than forty kilometers per hour.

But now, he was going at full speed—

Entirely because he was afraid of the magic beast in the sky behind, chasing him.

Hence, Hal had accelerated to top speed to escape. Soth ascended slightly and was now flying at an altitude just above the clusters of high-rise buildings.

"But for a dragon, it's not like it matters whether I'm going at fifty kilometers per hour or two hundred..." muttered Hal to himself.

Gripping the steering wheel, his hands were sweating slightly. Just by using magic for high-speed flight, elite dragons were able to break the sound barrier.

Hal was keeping the white copper mirror targeted by the dragon in his shirt pocket.

Sacred treasures used in religious rites since time immemorial sometimes became vessels of magical power.

Among such vessels, some of them even carried spiritual energy transcending simple magical power—divinity—thereby elevating them to become substitutes for gods.

This type of "sacred divine artifact" was what Hal and others called Grave Goods.

Even if Grave Goods underwent changes in form, the divinity and magical power they had acquired would still remain essentially intact.

Whether processed to make a mirror or melted into a viscous fluid to pour into a mold, divinity would not be lost immediately. Precisely due to these reasons,

this white copper mirror was usable in a covenant ritual to Heartmetallize into the leviathan's heart.

What was Raak Al Soth thinking about?

Hal drove while pondering desperately. Had Soth refrained from using flames and magic to avoid damaging the mirror inside the car? Or did he think it was okay to melt the mirror using heat then remold using alchemy?

The former would be good news. At least it would guarantee his life for the time being and offer a chance to escape successfully.

But if Soth's sadistic interest in abusing Hal and his friends prevailed over his desire to seize the mirror, wouldn't he breathe fire boldly and directly?

Don't breathe fire, don't breathe fire, don't breathe fire—Hal prayed desperately.

At least, not until he abandoned the car to hide inside this wasteland of a city. With that, Hal would be able to concentrate fully on erasing his own presence or even use magic to barely make his way out alive.

Although failing to escape was possible, Hal was going to struggle and exhaust all avenues available to him as a human being—

However, Hal's hopes and prayers were in vain.

By the time he realized, the dragon was already discharging blue-white flames from his jaws, engulfing the light motor vehicle.

Naturally, Hal was plunged into the predicament of bracing his entire body against the heat and the impact.

'You're asking why is it that only girls can establish covenants with serpents?'

When was it that he had asked his father this question?

According to Hal's recollections, it should have been five years ago. Soon after his childhood friend Asya had entered a covenant with her partner Rushalka, this conversation had taken place between Hal and his father.

'Well, it'd be very long and boring to give an explanation based on the theory.'

Confronted with his son's question, the father had pondered for a while before answering.

'But it becomes very simple if I put it this way: because of differences in talent.'

'Talent?'

'Yes. Jobs and duties related to supernatural phenomena such as gods, magic, monsters, etc have been dominated by women since ancient times. Examples include priestesses, witches and sacrificial maidens... Of course, there are also examples of men taking on the same duties. But in terms of proportion, women still occupy the majority of cases. Talent in this domain is influenced by gender to such an extent.'

'I see. So girls are naturally born with greater suitability to become magic users.'

For a parent-child conversation, one would find the usage of technical jargon a bit too abundant.

But this was commonplace for them, hence Hal was not concerned and simply nodded in agreement.

'You should already know that we humans have cut ties with magic for a number of centuries now. Especially after the Industrial Revolution, those with facetious proclivities who pursue studies in such strange fields of knowledge have mostly been con artists or members of cult organizations.'

What a father. It never occurred to him to consider whether his explanations were appropriate for a child's level.

Speaking of which, Hal seemed to recall someone saying "like father, like son" in exasperation...

'Unused abilities will naturally become atrophied, right? Compared to the age of myths in the past and the ambition-filled ancient times, modern humans' disposition to magic has grown rather dismal.'

An artificial dragonoid race and massive alchemical undertakings—

These were reportedly part of grand magic dating back to the ancient past.

Hal's father belonged to a SAURU research team that uncovered information from ancient, medieval and early modern times to interpret and decipher in detail. After careful research discovered prospects of new applications for this ancient knowledge, the field finally revived after overcoming numerous hardships and trials.

'The result was that the rare talent required to communicate telepathically with serpents, thereby performing high-level magic, only appears in girls with outstanding inborn gifts in the first place.'

'So in ancient times, it's possible that males might have been able to form covenants with serpents?'

'Possibly, but that said, living in contemporary times, we have no choice but to shove the danger onto young girls, in order to actualize the magic to oppose dragonkind...'

While dreaming of a nostalgic conversation with his late father—

Hal's consciousness gradually woke up.

He was quite impressed at his young self who had not disliked such a father at the time, feeling fond nostalgia for his father's efforts at fulfilling a father's duty to spend time with his child...

"Woahhhh!"

The evening breeze was blowing across the cold surface of the road. Hal screamed and jumped up.

He had apparently lost consciousness. His last memory was a scene of getting incinerated by the dragon's flames together with the car.

But for some reason, he was now lying in a business district in the city center filled with high-rise buildings.

"Not even.. a single burn."

Hal muttered to himself.

Unbelievably, he was completely unharmed. Even his clothing showed no traces of having been singed.

Checking his shirt pocket, he found the white copper mirror safe and intact.

Burned by a dragon's fire, the car must have been incinerated and vaporized early on without leaving a single screw behind. And naturally, the driver would have gotten caught up in it, but why!?

To confirm his current location, Hal surveyed his surroundings.

He was in front of a train station. In addition, this was quite a large terminal. As soon as he saw the station's architecture with antique bricks, Hal immediately realized.

This was the place people called Tokyo Station in the past.

Hal had collapsed somewhere near the Marunouchi entrance.

In this especially conspicuous spot amidst clusters of modern high-rise buildings, the train station's romantic atmosphere served as an especially grand display.

Clearly Hal was still racing in the car just earlier, but why was he here now?

Hal found it strange. Unintentionally looking at the road, he jumped in fright.

The silver pocket watch—his father's memento—had fallen to the ground, shattered. Among the pocket watch's fragments was a small black stone.

A stone covered with sharp edges, virtually without any roundness. It looked similar to quartz.

Picking up this stone, Hal was surprised.

"It's hot...?"

For some reason, the stone was hot. It felt like he would suffer a low-temperature burn if he held it for long durations.

In any case, Hal threw it into his waist pouch first. Why had his father placed such an object inside the watch?

Just as Hal was feeling puzzled, Raak Al Soth's laughter resounded throughout the sky.

"Fu... Fufufu. Despite being a close relative of monkeys, you turn out to be quite promising!"

Very near. Hal jumped in fright.

Frantically, he rushed into Tokyo Station's entrance, then taking care not to let the enemy see him from outside, he discreetly checked out the situation in the sky.

The bronze dragon was flying above Hibiya Street, two blocks away.

Gazing down on the ground surface, he flew through the air slowly.

"I see, you dared to embark on this foolhardy quest precisely because you possess means to deceive dragons. Fufufufu, not a bad trick. O nameless youngster, I swear upon my name, Raak Al Soth, to hunt you down and tear you apart!"

"Th-That's overestimating me way too much..."

Hearing Soth's declaration which seemed to convey his enjoyment of the game, Hal could not help but feel the urge to clutch his head.

He was simply running around like a cornered rat. But since Soth had come here, it meant that Asya and Orihime were probably fine.

This was a fortunate result born from Hal's course of action. A truly great accomplishment.

Rushalka was very weakened.

It was probably very difficult for her to muster full strength to defeat Raptors in bulk like she did in her prime. Even so, as long as Soth was absent, Rushalka should be able to win.

Given it was Asya, she should manage to find a way to victory.

"If only cellphones worked, then I could ask about the situation on that side."

In Old Tokyo where antennas were not functioning, ordinary calls could not connect.

Hal shrugged and peeked outside again.

Soth was flying leisurely, swirling in the air above this area. He was using a dragon's sharp eyesight to scan the ground surface.

Soon enough, he would probably start using search magic in addition to eyesight.

In that case, trying to disappear without trace in hiding would become very difficult...

Hal dumped the entire contents of his waist pouch onto the ground. Then from these various tools of the trade, he picked out those he felt might come in handy. The pocket watch aside—the backup Clockwork Mage—his folding knife was probably worthless here.

There was also the .220 revolver kept in a leather holster.

Hal had gotten his hands on this handgun via channels similar to those for obtaining the forged driver's license. Although Hal was untrained in unarmed combat, he occasionally used this gun for self-defense. Against enemies on the level of a grizzly bear, even this type of small caliber firearm could easily shoot them to death when used in conjunction with attack magic—

Hal sighed. A dragon's threat level was several hundred million times a grizzly's, right?

I guess I'm gonna die here? Just as the gloomy future prediction rushed into his mind, Hal suddenly felt a gaze and jumped in fright. It was not far ahead, from that expanse of darkness occupying the interior of the large abandoned station.

A pair of golden eyes shining with mysterious light.

These eyes belonged to someone he had seen before, the girl dressed in the scarlet kimono.

Part 4

"On further thought, out of all the people I know, I guess you're the only one who brings forth miracles. I wouldn't be too surprised even if you suddenly appeared..."

The helper who had "taken him out" of the vehicle consumed by flames...

...was most likely this spirit who took the form of a kimono-clad girl, Hal deduced while he spoke. At the same time, he secretly guessed that she must have used something akin to Teleportation magic.

"If you're responsible for why I was acting weird the last two times, maybe I don't need to thank you. So what exactly is the truth?"

"Well, I do admit that I employed some petty tricks to test you."

Like last time, the girl was speaking in an arrogant tone of voice.

The station did not even have any electrical lighting but moonlight illuminated the area near the entrance where the two of them were at. Thanks to that, Hal was able to observe carefully.

Very child-like indeed. However, there was a kind of bewitching quality to that adorable face.

"The first time we met, I toyed slightly with your eyes and your mind. Fufu, not a bad trick, was it not?"

"What are you testing by putting me in a state of panic in front of a dragon..."

Although she was confessing with a proud smile, her true nature was that of a mysterious spirit.

Too exasperated to get angry, Hal spoke a little helplessly, "If it's just something like haunting or a curse, I'd actually be able to accept it readily. After all, I've had experience with that before."

"Had I the intention to haunt you, I would have killed you in one breath. After all, I do still possess that level of power. What I wish to see is your 'limit.' Confronted with a life or death situation against a monster impossible to

defeat, do you still have the capacity to struggle in search of survival until the very moment of death..."

Saying that lightly, the girl pointed to Hal's feet.

"Were this bit of minimum capacity absent in you, then even having *that thing* would be futile."

Hal looked down at his feet.

Located there were the possessions he had dumped out of his pouch just now.

The girl was pointing at the small black stone. The mysterious stone hidden in his father's pocket watch—

"You mean this?"

"Yes, the flint."

That odd-sounding term was apparently referring to this small black stone.

"Fufu, the fragment of the flint star pouring flames into the conqueror's secret runes... All sentient dragons would surely be outraged were they to find out it had fallen into the hands of a human, jealous to the point of insanity. Truly ludicrous."

Watching the girl's smile, Hal revisited his memories.

The conqueror's secret runes, fragment of the star—She had mentioned these before.

"By the way, brat, that dragon seems serious in wanting to hunt you down."

The girl turned her gaze outside the station.

Hal peered again at the sky from a dark spot at the Tokyo Station's entrance. Folding his wings, Soth was landing on the roof of a high-rise building.

But he was clearly not just taking a simple break.

There were spheres of white light hovering over his head.

Not just one or two but hundreds at least. Countless spheres of light were decorating the night sky like a radiant galaxy of stars.

"I command all 'eyes' to report back after seeking my prey far and wide!"

In response to Soth's incantation, the white lights scattered in all directions.

They even descended slowly to the ground like snowflakes.

"Those are all spies for locating you. To think he would go so far as to search every corner for a mere human, he must be mad."

Facing the girl who was commenting in amusement, Hal suddenly noticed something.

Despite having a dragon so near, right before his eyes, he was not having any issues at all. He did not see any fiery hallucinations. Neither did his body become paralyzed. Evidently, the girl's "petty tricks" had already been dispelled.

But the fact that he was in a hopeless situation still remained the same.

Sighing deeply, Hal turned to face the girl again.

"What is your aim in testing me on purpose? But then again, even though I have a ton of complaints about this matter, it is also thanks to you that I didn't get burned to death, so I guess I still have to thank you—"

"You need not express your gratitude. I only did it out of ulterior motives."

Staring at Hal, the girl interrupted Hal's thanks.

Unlike her child-like appearance, the girl's eyes could be described as mysterious and seductive.

Those eyes were golden and felt reptilian. Then Hal suddenly realized.

The girl's eyes greatly resembled those of dragons—

"Realized finally? Brat. You have now met the devil indeed."

"D-Devil?"

"Yes, the devil who will tempt you into the path of carnage. The devil who deliberately rescued you from an instantaneous death of incineration, so as to watch you perish in a more unsightly manner."

The girl smiled. A malevolent smile.

"Let us make a deal."

Then the devil who led people to hell proposed without holding back.

"I shall confer to you the power of dragonbane—the conqueror's runes that dragonkind unquestionably reveres and seeks out. The special privilege of the dragonslayer shall be bestowed upon you."

Dragonbane. Dragonslayer. Hal could not help but doubt his hearing. In other words, killing dragons.

Didn't all such terms mean the slaughtering of dragons?

"It is a power that can exterminate even that dragon with ease. Hence, you shall now submit that stone and give up on *dying respectably*."

"...What did you say?"

"Abandon living and dying as a mortal. Instead—"

The girl's lips twisted from her smile. For some reason, the shape was slightly reminiscent of a crack.

A smile that not only seemed non-human but even felt a bit reptilian. Hal could not help but stare in mesmerization.

"You shall become a war god... Or perhaps the devil who will destroy the world. But should you lack the corresponding capacity, then you shall simply die pitifully."

"Y-Your proposal is way too shady..."

"Form a covenant with me, brat. You shall become king—the one to rule over all 'serpents' in this world and bear the brunt of dragonkind's fear and hatred."

Hal felt troubled. This was way too sinister.

He understood that her invitation was too unusual. Besides, no one could guarantee that things would proceed as smoothly as described by this girl—no, this monster.

Be that as it may...

Hal could not completely reject the proposal's value in taking the gamble.

Right now, he was indeed cornered. He was backed into a critical situation where death only lay ahead.

In that case, he could only follow the whims of fate... However—

"Ah yes, by the way. About the dragon rampaging outside, suppose he proceeded to kill you directly but if that were not enough to sate him, what would then result?"

"..."

"If memory serves me correctly, you apparently brought two little ladies with you. Will a bloodthirsty and violent member of the deplorable dragon race let them go free? Hmm, now that would be a gamble."

Hearing the girl's pretentious murmurings, Hal really wanted to click his tongue.

As expected of a self-styled devil would be his sarcastic response. However, Hal's mind was greatly shaken by the possibility she pointed out that he had overlooked.

Hal sighed again and took a deep breath. After ten seconds or so of deep thought, Hal let go of his hesitation.

Mustering his emotions of reckless self-abandonment, he chanted the magical incantation of "whatever, even if it fails."

"You, self-styled devil or whatever, although there's a mountain of problems I'd like to point out..."

Hal glared at the girl and said, "Since a dragon is hunting me anyway, I might as well go all-in and take a gamble. I accept your invitation."

This decision was enterprising yet passive.



In a certain sense, it was very much in Haruga Haruomi's style. Picking up the small black stone again, Hal gripped it tightly. The heat gradually spread in his palm.

"Very well, brat! In that case, you shall continue to advance!"

The girl in the scarlet garment nodded emphatically then suddenly vanished like a puff of smoke.

There was no lighting inside the devastated interior of Tokyo Station. Vast darkness stretched out in front of Hal, making him feel like he was located before the underworld's entrance that was sealed by darkness.

But at the same time as the girl's departure, a light source illuminating this darkness was born.

A blazing crimson flame appeared in the dark. Thanks to that, the interior of Tokyo Station's Marunouchi entrance became clearly visible.

Overhead was a tall dome-shaped ceiling. An old relic made of duralumin.

The entrance portion was very wide, rather fitting for a terminal that reputedly handled the daily throughput of a million passengers in the past.

And in the center, an intense flame was burning.

Hal approached the source of heat and light.

As a result, the blazing flame burned even more intensely, instantly expanding to a height that almost touched the ceiling.

Exposed to the powerful gust of hot air, Hal was sweating while he muttered, "So what should I do next...?"

In that instant, a change occurred.

The blazing flame suddenly split apart and scattered. Then out of the fire appeared a giant "beast." It was as sudden as the summoning of a "serpent" by a witch.

Feeling surprised, Hal gave a brief yell.

"A dragon!?"

Beautiful, fierce, courageous, a "beast" full of solemnity and divinity.

It was the widely recognized creature known as the dragon.

Its physique was as strong and massive as an elite dragon's. From Hal's perspective, the nine sharp horns growing out of its head looked almost like a crown.

The body's surface was a brilliant red aptly called "crimson."

The dragon happened to be sitting in a posture that would be called cross-legged for humans, completely motionless.

Then in the instant Hal faced this dragon head on—

Held in his hand, the *stone* exploded and released a flash of light, crumbling!

"Woah!"

Then suddenly, Hal's entire body even started to burn.

Enveloped by blazing fire, Hal's whole body turned into a mass of flame, suffering the onslaught of super-high heat that almost drove him insane.

Hot. Hot hot hot hot hot hot hot.

Turned into a burning effigy, Hal collapsed and rolled all over the ground!

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Just as Hal was struggling in pain, the girl's voice could be heard overhead.

(Come, brat. Let those brand-new flames pour into the sacred seal. But remember to hurry before you incinerate to death. In the event of failure, you will simply burn here until nothing is left.)

"Uh, I never heard anything about that!"

Confronted with the sudden ultimatum, Hal roared and complained, rolling randomly all over the place.

At the same time, Hal saw it. Blue-white light was appearing in front of the red dragon, tracing out a symbol in the air—

A pictogram resembling a "bow with a nocked arrow" or a "tilted half moon."

That was the kind of symbol Hal saw.

"R-Ruruk Soun's magical symbol...?"

Despite suffering from the intense heat and pain that almost rendered him unconscious, Hal still muttered.

The runic symbol felt like it belonged to the same system as the cuneiform gathering the wisdom of dragonkind, but Hal had never seen it before.

(This is a dragonslaying seal among the secret runes that only conquerors are capable of wielding... I am bestowing upon you my favorite and most trustworthy rune, that of the Bow.)

It was the girl's voice again. This time, it came from the dragon's mouth.

At the same time, the pictogram of the "bow with a nocked arrow" began to shrink, becoming roughly palm-sized before descending in front of Hal who was rolling around in pain.

The rune, traced out by light, flashed blue-white as it hovered in the air.

(With my dying breath, this Rune of the Bow also incinerated to oblivion at one point in time. However, if the flint star's fragment lights up a flame, the dragonslaying authority should be able to manifest in this world once more—)

Simply stated, all I need to do is grab hold of this weird symbol?

Hal screamed while rolling nonstop. Enduring the heat and pain that would drive a person mad, he almost fainted.

Facing the bow-like magical symbol that hovered just above the floor, Hal reached out with all his strength, almost betting with his life.

What motivated him to do so was his fighting spirit and the unyielding fiber of his being, as well as the terror of absolutely not wanting to die.

The usual Hal would probably have given up halfway.

But when death was lurking around the corner with the tragic situation of his entire body on fire, his willpower would naturally rise to its maximum.

(Put forth all your strength, brat. So-called power is something that one must seize by their own hand.)

The crimson dragon incited Hal irresponsibly with the girl's voice.

Like I need you to tell me. Hal gritted his teeth and reached out with his right hand.

At last, he finally reached it—

In that instant, the Rune of the Bow became enveloped in flame as well and started to burn intensely.

Having succeeded at the task, Hal immediately felt his consciousness grow hazy. But in the end, his right palm was definitely experiencing astounding heat.

(Fufu—Whether or not a new Solomon will be born to usher in a new era... As temporary amusement, this is not bad.)

The girl's voice was whispering something but by this point, Hal had almost lost consciousness completely.

Part 5

Hal probably fainted for roughly several minutes.

Suddenly coming back to his senses, he discovered that the flames burning his entire body had vanished spontaneously.

Furthermore, there was not a single burn on his body. His clothing was intact as well. The scene of him turned into a burning human torch almost seemed as though it had been just a nightmare...

But after getting to his feet and looking up, he saw the crimson dragon sitting upright before his eyes.

"I never expected I'd encounter two elites in a single night..."

Just as Hal was muttering to himself, the dragon remained motionless, almost like a statue—

"It's already dead!?"

Realizing that, Hal tried using his finger to touch what would be the dragon's ankle.

This resulted in that part of the dragon's body crumbling to pieces. This was a petrified dragon corpse.

Hal looked up again at the dragon's remains. There was a large and deep hole in the chest as though it had been gouged by something sharp. Probably the fatal wound.

"In other words, you're not only a ghost—but also a dragon's ghost..."

The girl in the scarlet kimono, the mysterious spirit.

Hal tried to superimpose that child-like visage with the crimson dragon in his mind. Although the two were totally dissimilar, there was unbelievably no sense of dissonance.

Fufu... Hal heard the girl's giggling. His guess was apparently correct.

However, where had that Rune of the Bow disappeared off to?

Just as Hal was feeling perplexed, the palm of his right hand suddenly heated up. He opened up his hand and looked, only to find the Bow illustrated on his palm.

This magical symbol was what the dragon had spoken in the girl's voice about "bestowing upon you"—

The unidentified rune was carved on Haruga Haruomi's palm like a tattoo!

Hal gasped out of surprise.

In that instant, the wall of Tokyo Station's Marunouchi entrance suddenly collapsed, producing a large cloud of debris.

Then a giant super lifeform intruded from the large hole produced from the destruction.

"The fleeing game ends here, human child."

Obviously, that was Raak Al Soth's staid voice.

Moonlight was streaming into Tokyo Station's entrance through the collapsed wall.

The bronze dragon's massive body was bathed in moonlight—

Facing off one-on-one against the most ferocious magic beast, Hal became a fatalist in a rare moment.

Looking up at the heavens, he cursed fate's cruelty with a "Goddamnit." But he also noticed something strange at this time. Soth's eyes and entire body were filled with an intensely emotional quality.

It was surprise and excitement—

"Fu... Fufu, never in my wildest dreams would I have expected you to be privy to such a massive secret. Thank you, human. I never thought I would find the queen's remains in such a place!"

Laughing with joy, Soth gazed fervently at his petrified kin.

"Fufufufu, since the queen's remains are here, it naturally implies the possibility of finding *that*. O human child, hurry and answer me."

Without warning, Soth extended his right front limb.

There were many differences between the body shapes of elite dragons. But for the most part, every one of them had very long front limbs with five fingers, greatly resembling human "hands."

In other words, Soth had extended his "right arm."

Hal was grasped inside what corresponded to the super lifeform's palm.

"Speaking of the conqueror's runes held by the Crimson Queen, naturally there is the mighty bow of dragonslaying, renowned far and wide... Was there a seal in her surroundings? Speak now if you know. If you do not know—"

Hal was raised up to Soth's eye level.

He made eye contact with the savage dragon at close range.

Such an oppressive presence. Simply getting stared at made his body stiff. His throat also became greatly parched and thirsty.

Furthermore, the dense rows of teeth in the dragon's jaws were as long and sharp as swords. A mere human would probably get torn to pieces in a single bite.

In addition, although he was gripping Hal relatively gently, had he the intention—

Excessive terror turned Hal into a silent puppet.

"Hmm, you choose to say nothing, is that so? Then it cannot be helped."

Soth's tone of voice was very calm.

But at the same time, he suddenly applied more force in his hand that was gripping Hal.

Shattering every bone in his body, crushing his flesh, rupturing every internal organ, the instant of exploding with a pop was imminent. Hal screamed shrilly.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

This time, it really was a death cry. At least, Hal thought so.

Suffering. Pain. Aching. Crushed. Compressed. Pressure. Force. Force. Force.

As a giant dragon whose body length measured dozens of meters, Soth's grip strength ought to be capable of crushing concrete with ease.

Suffering under this force was Hal as a human. He could not possibly endure.

Hal was experiencing this intensity of compression and pain for the very first time in his life. He never thought he would pass away normally but did not expect to die in this manner—

Owwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww... Hmm?

While enduring the dragon's grip with his entire body screaming in pain, Hal noticed something.

He survived. His body was resisting the strength of Soth's tightly clenched fist without getting crushed. It was as though his entire body was forged from the world's hardest material.

Hal was shocked by his body's abnormality.

"Hoh?"

Soth cast a gaze of curiosity at him.

Despite reptilian appearances and modes of life, elite dragons were quite rich in emotions. During this brief duration, Hal already fully understood this fact.

Right now, Raak Al Soth was feeling intrigued by the existence known as Hal.

However, the dragon's eyes immediately showed comprehension.

"I see now... To think a human child has stepped upon the ladder of the dragon kings. Fufu, I heard there was a similar case back in ancient Greece... but never expected a reenactment in the modern world."

After speaking quietly, Soth tossed Hal away.

His entire body smashing into the tiled floor of the station's interior, Hal groaned "Oww."

It really did hurt. However, his body did not suffer an injury. Despite feeling pain, Haruga Haruomi's physical body was extremely resilient, completely unharmed.

Clearly he was thrown at the ground from a height of over ten meters!

In fact, Hal was able to stand up immediately.

But looking up at Soth's massive body, Hal was greatly surprised. The elite dragon was looking down at him with slightly ajar jaws, blue-white flames flickering in the depths of his mouth.

The dragon was about to exhale a conflagration!

"O false king, allow me to address you as Tyrannos again after two millennia... Although temporary, you are the conqueror who has inherited the Bow after all. Allow me to offer you a fiery death after I fulfill etiquette."

After addressing Hal with a strange title, Soth opened his jaws wide.

However, his voice did not pause. Unlike humans, dragons did not shape their lips to pronounce words. Instead, they allegedly produced their voice from a mysterious organ located in the depths of their throat.

"Fortunately, the temperature inside my body has warmed up substantially. Given now, the earlier ineptitude should persist no longer—O secret runes of Ruruk Soun!"

Soth concluded with a magic incantation.

Seven letters, from the magic alphabet that only dragons knew how to use, manifested above the gigantic body, arranging themselves in a row. These letters were apparently the secret runes of Fire, being surrounded by blazing flames.

Hal knew that this was magic for increasing the power of flames.

Although his body had evidently become extremely resilient, Hal was not confident he could withstand Soth's fire. What should he do!?

"Allow me to incinerate your hallowed body, thereby toppling the hegemony of the new Tyrannos. Farewell."

Soth even went as far as to declare an execution.

In that instant, all hesitation and thoughts were purged from Hal's mind completely.

How can I let you kill me like this!?—This notion was spreading throughout his entire body like fire. Suddenly looking down, he saw the Secret Rune of the Bow appearing on his right palm.

Instantly, he heard the scarlet girl's laughing voice in his mind.

(Fufufufu, are you okay with this, brat? Know that once you shoot him, you can never turn back again.)

(I don't care! By this point, stop feeding me that crap!)

Yelling in the bottom of his heart, Hal faintly understood how to use this weapon.

Most likely because he was determined to "shoot," the secret rune had transmitted the required image into the wielder's mind.

Hal instantly uttered orders to the secret rune in his palm, "Create the Bow—the dragonslaying bow—At once!"

At the same time, Soth spewed out blue-white flames.

Hal took a great jump to the side then rolled on the ground, escaping in an unsightly manner from his location in front of Soth. This was not to evade the flames because doing so would not prevent the dragon's conflagration from spreading widely to both sides.

Instead, he was moving to create a clear passage.

So as to allow the Bow behind to advance successfully—

"What!?"

ROOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAR!

While breathing fire, Soth was surprised by *the other dragon* roaring loudly.

Indeed. The petrified crimson dragon, the dragon that had died and turned into a corpse, the true identity of the scarlet girl—She was roaring loudly.

The crimson dragon stood up with swift motions.

However, stone fragments were crumbling and falling off from various parts of her body.

At this rate, the whole body would probably collapse in short time.

Nevertheless, she still advanced bravely without regret, using her body to block Soth's flames.

Then in the next instant, the already deceased crimson dragon was enveloped in *white flames*.

Her entire body was burning with platinum-colored flames, giving off great heat at the same time. Seeing that massive incandescent body, Hal instantly pushed his right hand forward—extending it in Soth's direction.

A subconscious action. He felt that it was possible to "shoot" by doing so.

As expected, the secret rune depicted on his palm quickly heated up. Then the Secret Rune of Ruruk Soun suddenly appeared in front of the incandescent red dragon.

It was the Secret Rune of the Bow, almost as large as the dragon's upper torso.

In addition, it was also proof that what remained of this deceased dragon was Hal's Bow.

"Ku—!? You have already mastered the power of dragonbane!?"

Greatly shocked, Soth instantly spread his wings and flew.

Retreating through the giant hole in Tokyo Station's outer wall that he had made earlier, Soth flew into Old Tokyo's night sky once again.

However, it was too late. Hal issued the intent to attack.

"Fire!"

Instantly, the deceased crimson dragon spread her wings wide as though threatening.

Then the shining Secret Rune of the Bow in front of her released a torrent of flame. The vivid crimson fire was astounding in its raging intensity.

The fire shot from the secret rune flew into the night sky in a straight line.

Instead of incinerating human cities to oblivion, it aimed to slaughter a kindred dragon.

"Ohhhhhhhh!?"

Soth was greatly shocked, devoured completely by the torrent of flame.

Scorching the bronze dragon, the crimson flames spread upwards, thereby turning into an enormous pillar of fire rushing straight into Old Tokyo's night sky.

Amidst the burning flames, Soth's body gradually vanished.

He was apparently attempting to escape using the magic of Teleportation.

Then the crimson dragon expelling this pillar of fire—that girl's true body—rapidly collapsed, dissolving inside the platinum flames, gradually disappearing in the form of ash and dust.

The giant crimson body collapsed completely with astounding speed within a minute or two.

Just as Hal was staring wide-eyed in surprise, the sky resounded with Soth's voice.

"Allow me to say goodbye for now, human! But I swear I shall revisit again, to have you drawn and quartered. I shall undoubtedly kill you, to seize that Bow by force!"

The voice issued a somber declaration to Haruga Haruomi.

Hearing that, Hal sighed. Regardless, giving way to fatigue, he bent down and sat cross-legged in a sloppy manner.

Meanwhile, Asya had remained at Ochanomizu to battle the group of Raptors—

Together with her injured partner Rushalka, she patiently endured the persistent and ferocious attacks. At the same time, she was surely and steadily killing the Raptors one by one. Then finally, just as she finished off the last enemy...

At the former university that had been used as the altar for the covenant ritual...

Its campus and the surrounding streets were littered with Raptor corpses everywhere.

The dead dragons had all turned into stone as usual. As for the mage candidate Orihime who had witnessed the intense battle's process and end result—

Seeing Asya swaying as though feeling dizzy, she frantically rushed over.

"Asya-san, are you okay!?"

Supporting the veteran witch's delicate body, she inquired.

With great finesse, Rushalka had steadily taken care of all the Raptors.

Although it took a while, there was virtually no risk throughout the entire process. Rather than a fight, it felt more like "homework."

"Did you get hurt somewhere!? But I don't think you got hit—"

"Don't worry... I'm just a bit low in blood sugar."

Leaning on Orihime, Asya looked up into the sky.

The victorious "serpent" Rushalka had landed on the roof of the university building, resting her wings for now.

With a nod from Asya, the partner's blue and heroic figure gradually grew faint and suddenly disappeared soon after. Whether the process of summoning or disappearing, both were equally swift.

"Summoning a 'serpent' and maintaining her physical form causes a great deal of strain. Hence, it's only natural to consume a corresponding amount of energy."

"Blood sugar...? So you mean you're hungry?"

"P-Please don't say it so bluntly."

Because the other person was not Haruomi as well as being a girl of the same age, Asya would feel slightly concerned about matters of face.

However, these thoughts reminded her of the childhood friend with whom she could spend time together without feeling fettered by such details.

"Never mind me... We have to hurry and find Haruomi. I can't believe he's playing hide-and-seek with an elite. That's totally absurd no matter what."

During the battle with the Raptors, Soth had not returned even once.

Hence, Asya wanted to believe that he was still chasing Haruomi.

Hoping for her childhood friend's safety, she had to go help him right now.

"Yes, 'it's already too late' is not something I will believe. Isn't it the same for you, Asya-san?"

Just as Orihime nodded as well, the dark night sky was suddenly illuminated by red light.

Jumping in fright, the two girls simultaneously turned their gazes towards that direction in the sky.

"Eh... What is that!?"

"Looks quite near here. Perhaps that elite dragon did something!"

Buildings of various heights could be seen there.

Standing out was also the towering spire of black—the Monolith.

The imposing image of the super-tall structure built by dragonkind in the Concession was visible from here.

And right now—

A suddenly generated pillar of crimson flame had rushed into the sky.

The pillar of fire was a bit slanted. From Asya and Orihime's location, it looked almost as gigantic as the Monolith.

Its eerie glow rendered the two girls stunned and speechless.

Their faces looked as though they were in prayer.

Although they had no concrete reasons, both girls felt that the towering pillar of fire was related to the boy they should locate.

Perhaps he was present at the site of the flame pillar—

This unfounded speculation turned out to match the truth perfectly.

Chapter 4 – Soth's Counterattack

Part 1

A triangular prism of pure black, standing over a kilometer tall—the Monolith.

A giant structure that dragons always built in concession territories without exception.

It was said that the construction of a Monolith required high-level magic of the elite dragons. From any wide open space, the Monolith's imposing appearance could even be seen easily from Tokyo New Town.

But nighttime was different.

The pure-black pillar had no lighting.

Hence, once night fell, it would always disappear from the sight of New Town's inhabitants. That being said, a mysterious pillar of blazing flame had illuminated the black landmark's majestic appearance...

"That flame... must be related to dragons after all."

After reading the text message she had received on her cellphone, Shirasaka Hazumi sighed.

Last night at 11pm or so, a *pillar of fire* had appeared in the sky in Old Tokyo's direction, adding crimson illumination to the dark sky that only had the moon and the stars as light sources.

Like the majority of residents, Hazumi was also witnessing the scene from her window at home.

In the end, the *pillar of fire* burned for roughly ten minutes or so before vanishing as abruptly as it had appeared.

Almost like a leviathan, the supernatural "serpent" summoned by Hazumi—

"Oh, I have to text back... 'Understood, I'll head over immediately.'"

Dressed in Kogetsu Academy's uniform while operating her cellphone, Hazumi was the very image of a middle school girl about to make her way to school. In

fact, she was currently at the platform of Ryougoku Station, the rail station closest to the school.

However, instead of exiting the station, she boarded the train sliding into the platform.

Her destination was Shin-Kiba where the Mansion was located.

Whenever dragons flew to Tokyo New Town or various neighboring cities, if authorities concluded that sending her to fight would be "more effective and economical" than mobilizing the police, the Self-Defense Force or the TPDO, they would order her to summon her "serpent."

That was Shirasaka Hazumi's mission and responsibility.

If she wanted, she could probably request for a luxury courtesy car to take her to and from school or the Mansion.

No, it would be more accurate to say that all the adults around her wanted to do so. Not only to protect her, a little-known but important figure of New Town, but also as a matter of convenience.

Nevertheless, Hazumi liked to travel by train.

It never sat well with her to trouble others for matters she could clearly handle on her own.

After a bumpy train ride, she alighted at Shin-Kiba Station on the New Town Loop Line.

Then she started walking on foot. Arriving at the Mansion ten minutes later, Hazumi greeted the man at the reception then entered the building to reach the lobby.

"Good morning, Yukari-san."

"G'mornin', Hazumi-san. Then I'll skip the pleasantries. I've heard that things have gotten very strange."

The woman, whom Hazumi was acquainted with, spoke while sitting on the sofa in the lobby.

Hiiragi Yukari was the technical consultant belonging to the research organization of SAURU.

As part of her job, she was in charge of managing all witches active in the region. At the same time, she would "mobilize" witches in response to requests from civilian organizations and government agencies, support and protect witches, and even coordinate matters of training and cultivation.

Naturally, these duties were extremely important. However, Yukari was still young.

Although she was wearing a white blouse and a cardigan with a long skirt on the bottom, a high school uniform would probably not look too out of place on her either.

"Just as written in that text, last night's 'covenant ritual'... was interrupted due to an attack from an elite dragon. Fortunately, thanks to the active efforts of the bodyguards, the witch candidate seems to be fine."

"Yes. Orihime-neesama informed me last night that she was safe."

"Right, you two are cousins after all."

Nodding elegantly and generously, Yukari smiled.

Her long black hair and red-framed glasses reinforced her image as an intellectual beauty. Be that as it may, those eyes behind the glasses were slightly lethargic while deeply memorable.

"The problem is that the whereabouts of both the elite dragon and the Grave Good prepared for Orihime-san are currently unknown. The boy who went along to administer the ritual... Although he is quite clever, I'm a bit worried because he tends to run into misfortune at inopportune occasions."

"Is he someone you know, Yukari-san!?"

Hazumi stared wide-eyed after hearing the unexpected news.

"U-Umm, if you don't mind, perhaps I could head over to search the ruins...? If I rely on Minadzuki, perhaps I could cast search magic—"

Hazumi was a Level 2 witch.

She had yet to achieve full mastery of "serpent" control.

But even as a fledgling witch, as long as she listened intently to her partner's voice and offered her prayers sincerely, the leviathan would still exhibit substantial "power."

"Thank you, but you don't have to worry. He still seems to be alive. Apparently, the girl who was administering the ritual with him received a text saying 'I made it after all. It's fine if you retreated first.'"

"Th-That's all?"

"He's an eccentric with a peculiar personality after all. A bit abnormal in sociability. But he is very capable for his age and accustomed to traveling around the world. A very interesting boy."

"...Oh."

Unsure how to respond to this candid character commentary, Hazumi could only nod ambiguously.

However, her curiosity was slightly piqued. Due to her frail health and the need to be stationed at Tokyo constantly, she had not gone on distant journeys for a number of years now.

Hence, the word "traveling" held great attraction to her.

"...If there's a chance, I would really like to have a brief chat with him."

"To think you'd ignore the detail about him being an eccentric with a peculiar personality. Nothing less expected of you, Hazumi-san."

Hazumi paused for a moment then smiled faintly. In the end, Yukari was impressed by her for some reason.

"True. It might be quite amusing to see your angelic ways breach the barrier the eccentric puts up against others."

"P-Please don't say strange things. I'm nothing like that."

"Relax, you're definitely qualified. In your case, even if one were to ignore your personality, you'd definitely get certified as a first-rate angel by a comfortable margin based purely on appearance alone."

Hazumi could not help but feel shy under Yukari's narrowed and direct gaze.

Since people would occasionally tell her how greatly she resembled her elder cousin, Hazumi surmised that her own appearance should not be too bad. But even if that was the case, such praises would be too exaggerated...

Just as Hazumi shrank away, Yukari changed the subject.

"Until we confirm where the elite dragon who appeared in Old Tokyo had disappeared to, Hazumi-san, I hope you can remain on standby here for now, just in case of a reappearance—"

It need not be spelt out. When the time came, Yukari would request for her to head to the scene and fight alongside her "serpent."

Hazumi had no experience in fighting elites.

However, no one else in the Kantou region currently had the ability to do.

"I-I will try my best," declared Hazumi, feeling a surging sense of responsibility.

But it was quite unbearable to behold her frailty that was the antithesis of a forceful display.

"Apart from you, Hazumi-san, a master-class witch also happens to be staying in New Town at the moment. I will talk to her and see."

"Y-Yes. Thank you."

Yukari left the lobby after speaking briskly.

Hazumi hastily bowed to her while she was leaving. Despite being born with aptitude to be a witch, Hazumi was absolutely not someone who enjoyed fighting and conflict. Even now, she still did not understand the body of knowledge called "magic."

That was what Hazumi was like. It would be wonderful if she could receive support from a more accomplished witch by her side.

After Yukari departed, Hazumi went to put down her schoolbag in the room set aside exclusively for her use.

Then she made her way to the courtyard. Given her position as what one could call the mistress of this Mansion, there was one fact that she had difficulty voicing openly. Namely, to Hazumi, the building was absolutely not a comfortable place.

However, the courtyard was a separate matter.

The lawn was neatly trimmed. A carefully maintained flowerbed. More importantly, it had ample sunlight.

Lighting inside the Mansion was quite dim and it felt like being shrouded in heavy air.

In the past, Hazumi had discreetly discussed this with Yukari alone but she ended up smiling in a troubled manner and replying "You really are an angel, Hazumi-san"—

Arriving at the courtyard, Hazumi took a seat in her usual chair.

Enjoying the comfort of spring's gentle breeze, she recalled the school where the new term had just started.

Due to a witch's basic duties, it was unavoidable that she often missed school.

Attendance and various other issues were "adjusted" by those in the school administration who were in the know.

But compared to receiving special treatment secretly, what would please Hazumi more was being able to attend school normally, to spend time in school normally—

"What's the matter, Minadzuki?"

Even without being summoned, leviathans still protected their witches.

Hazumi inquired of her "serpent" because a Protection spell for repelling evil magic had suddenly deployed. Immediately, she could sense the magical presence interleaved in the wind.

This was most likely a coercive force bringing Death. Hazumi shuddered.

"You seem to have caught my eye, *imitation's* covenantee."

A staid but ominous voice was heard in the courtyard.

Spontaneously, a figure dressed in a black hooded robe appeared.

"Pray forgive my breach of etiquette. Naturally, I know that I ought to descend magnificently from the sky to purify these lands in a fiery blaze. A dragon's style as it should be. However, I must currently store up power no matter what, in preparation for the next adventure."

The robe was very similar to those worn by *sorcerers* in fantasy illustrations.

With very long sleeves and a hem reaching the ankles, it did not resemble modern Japanese clothing at all. In fact, let alone Japanese, this garment's wearer was not even human.

Beneath the hood was a reptilian face as ferocious as a dinosaur's.

The arm exposed from the long sleeve was covered with scales. A dragon's hand featuring five fingers with sharp claws.

"Kyahhhhhh!?"

Rather than a human, it was an elite dragon that had taken on *humanoid* form using magic.

The half-man half-dragon monster spoke to Hazumi who could not help but scream.

"My name is Raak Al Soth, the wanderer who seeks the road to kingship."

The dragon opened his jaws wide.

Dense rows of sharp teeth could be seen inside.

"I wish to rob you of your *imitation*. To slay the false king and drag him off his throne, I, too, need the power of dragonbane—A dragonslaying weapon!"

Part 2

"So it's already morning..."

Sparrows were chirping away somewhere. The morning sunlight was hurting Hal's eyes too.

Waking up in a refreshed mood, Hal flipped over the blanket covering his body.

Luckily, his body did not hurt much thanks to having five cushions to use as a mattress. As a side note, what Hal used as a bedroom was the front entrance of a mixed tenant building whose name he did not even know. The building's automatic door, which was no longer operational, was just before his eyes.

After a great yawn, Hal stood up.

It was not long after daybreak. He was on the shore of the Sumida River, in the area that was called Higashi-Nihonbashi in the past.

A mountain bike was parked near his temporary shelter.

After Soth disappeared last night, Hal had "searched" all over the place among the buildings in the area. In the end, he discovered this bike that was probably used for commuting in the past.

Fortunately, Hal had skillful hands and the problem of needing a key could be "resolved" using his tools at hand.

Having secured a new "pair of legs" to replace the car he had lost, Hal went to the Sumida River shore and decided to camp there.

After all, it was late at night and he was exhausted. More importantly, he was sleepy.

Having located bedding through the same methods as the bike, Hal spent the night peacefully like that until morning arrived—

"That was no dream last night..."

Hal muttered to himself. His memories of the "night of destiny" were far too vivid and real.

Hal opened his right hand and discovered that the Secret Rune of the Bow, carved there vividly like a tattoo, had vanished without him knowing when. He frowned.

Then suddenly coming up with an idea, he took out his knife and tried to stab the back of his left hand.

Ouch. Droplets of blood seeped out.

"But I was clearly unharmed by Soth's attacks... The rune of Ruruk Soun has also disappeared. What the heck is going on?"

"Fool. That would be because you lack *that intent*."

Someone responded to Hal's mutterings. Rather than a hallucination, it was a real voice.

Hal looked behind him to see the girl standing there. Dressed in a scarlet kimono, looking only eleven or twelve years old yet excessively arrogant, that girl—

The self-styled devil, an unidentified dragon's ghost.

"That's so convenient how you can suddenly appear and disappear."

"Not exactly. After all, the time limit for materializing is not long."

Confronted with the reappeared girl, Hal said calmly and quietly, "I'm the one who decided to step in the trap on my own, to accept your bizarre invitation, so there's basically nothing to complain about... But wasn't that ridiculous physical resilience going way too far? It felt like I'd be fine even if I got trampled by an elephant."

"Of course you will be fine. In order to kill you when you have *that intent*, even a dragon must call forth skills beyond breathing fire with full force."

"Oh my, to think I've exceeded the realm of ordinary humans that much..."

Hearing the girl explain with confidence and composure, Hal could not help but stare out into the distance.

"By the way, what specifically do you mean by *that intent*? Is it 'I don't wanna die!' or something like that?"

"Indeed. Nevertheless, brat, that level of effect is nothing more than a bonus for the power you have obtained. You haven't forgotten the potency of the Bow that sent the dragon retreating, have you?"

Hal nodded glumly. Of course he could not have forgotten.

"That was precisely the dragonslaying bow, a weapon of heaven capable of killing dragonkind. By obtaining a top-ranked seal from among the Secret Runes of Ruruk Soun, you have acquired what is tantamount to God's hammer."

The girl smiled lightly. It was a very diabolical smile.

However, Hal deliberately pretended not to notice.

No matter how he interpreted them, these were what one would call the devil's honeyed words, with an additional helping of excessive sugar and flattery. It was highly likely that she wanted to entice him.

Indeed, it was thanks to that whatever secret rune that he had succeeded in repelling the elite dragon.

But since this tool had dropped into his lap out of the blue, it was highly probable that he could lose it just as suddenly. Neither optimistic nor enterprising in personality, Haruga Haruomi was not one to value such things. And more importantly—

"I remember 'shooting' it last night for sure, but the body you used as materials for the Bow at the time... It's gone now, right? It already crumbled and collapsed, even burning up until nothing was left."

If the power of the Secret Rune of the Bow was to create the dragonslaying bow—

Was "a dragon's body" the required materials? Hal could not be certain since he only used it once, but he had a faint feeling that this was so.

Perhaps as the secret rune's master, he had subconsciously understood the usage method.

"Fufu, sufficient cleverness might be considered your strength. But too superficial, your thoughts and considerations are far too superficial."

The girl jeered while finding fault in Hal's opinion.

"How now? If you are willing to kneel down and beg me, I might very well take you by the hand and instruct you personally on a whim of generosity, perhaps?"

"No thanks. Your instructions aren't very trustworthy, to be honest."

Hal cautiously evaded the germinating seed of danger. As long as contact with spirits was avoided, one would naturally avoid getting haunted.

If he fell headlong into this secret rune business, it felt like there was a high chance of getting involved with "an unusual future."

This came from the instincts of a treasure hunter who understood magic somewhat.

"Yesterday too, I was almost burnt to death by the ritual you arranged for me."

"What words are you speaking? I should have refused you from the start. As said previously, you have met the devil."

The girl immediately responded to Hal's accusation with nonchalance.

"Rather, it would be better to say that a deal with the devil is guaranteed to be a trap."

"Then let me ask you, self-styled devil. Why did you give this precious treasure to someone like me instead of your fellow dragons?"

"A noble and beautiful heart founded upon philanthropy and benevolence."

"Thank you. You've given me evidence that your words cannot be trusted."

Hal began to pack up.

Either way, he managed to survive, so he should hurry and return to New Town! He was hungry and wanted a shower too. A nap after getting home would be nice as well.

Pushing the mountain bike, Hal strode ahead.

At this time, the girl followed and walked beside him with a matter-of-fact expression.

"Entry is refused to stalkers. House rules."

"You evidently need a lesson on how to express gratitude to your savior."

"Aren't you an extraterrestrial lifeform that only saved me out of ulterior motives? You even made me shoulder a whole load of different risks. Calling yourself my 'savior' is way too unconvincing. However, I don't care if you follow me."

This was a dragon's ghost calling herself the devil. Driving her away was probably impossible.

In that case, accepting her presence was probably the better choice instead.

"But you have to hide when others are around. Talking is not my thing and there's no way I can explain clearly to everyone why I'm being haunted by something like a guardian angel."

"This wish of yours should probably come to pass."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Not much remains of my energy for interfering with terrestrial phenomena. I am dead after all and even lost my remains in the battle last night, so materializing frivolously is not possible."

Not much remains. In other words, she meant "there was still some"?

Reading between the lines, Hal nodded secretly to himself.

"Oh right. It's a bit late to ask now, but what's your name? How should I address you?"

"In that case... Hinokagutsuchi will suffice."

The non-human girl answered solemnly in response to this question that could not be more basic.

It was the name of the fire god in Japanese mythology. Back in the extremely distant age of myths, Hinokagutsuchi's mother, Izanami, had died after childbirth due to getting burnt by his flames. The father, Izanagi, slew the matricidal child in a fit of rage using his divine sword.

During that event, Hinokagutsuchi's blood and corpse gave birth to countless deities—

"What a meaningful name, even as a choice of alias."

If Hal's memory served him correctly, Soth seemed to have called her true form the "Queen"...

In any case, Hal made his way to the gate leading to New Town, accompanied by the girl who called herself Hinokagutsuchi.

Hal had no idea that from this point onwards, his life was going to change nonstop like a tumbling rock.

During the dawn of fantasy RPGs, players were apparently encouraged to enter and ransack people's homes without permission, engaging in theft of items.

Hal's mountain bike was obtained through similar means.

Having been abandoned for upwards of a decade or more, it was clearly in poor condition.

However, Hal had taken the previous night as a chance to lubricate the bike and use tape to reinforce damaged parts, applying makeshift maintenance and repairs.

Thanks to that, the bike was still relatively smooth to ride.

Furthermore, Hinokagutsuchi disappeared on her own after Hal started riding the bike.

Abandoning the bike near the Ryougoku Bridge's gate, Hal then presented his access pass and went through the gate alone.

Taking the New Town Loop Line, he reached Narihirabashi Station in the Sumida ward by train, finally returning to the station closest to his home.

Then he continued home on foot.

(By the way, brat, you had brought companions, yes?)

Along the way home, Hinokagutsuchi's whispered lightly in his ear.

Something so convenient was apparently possible even when in immaterial form—when her tangible body had disappeared.

(Is it fine for you to ignore them?)

(Before sleeping last night, I already texted them I was safe, so let's talk about this later. Anyway, I just want to get home first and relax.)

Hal replied quietly.

He had spent the night outdoors in the outskirts of Old Tokyo along the Sumida River. Cellphones were usable there due to reception from New Town signal towers.

Asya had sent three texts to inquire if Hal was safe.

In addition, there were roughly ten missed calls from Asya.

Hal had responded with a brief text before going to sleep. Having learnt that Asya and Orihime had returned to New Town safe and sound, he felt a great load lifted from his heart.

The two girls had probably contacted Kenjou at Mirokudou via satellite phone to have him pick them up, right?

And now, Hal himself was finally home, however—

In front of the residence resembling a haunted house, two girls were standing outside the heavy door like imposing temple guardians.

Asya and Orhime. Casting sharp gazes filled with anger, the two of them eyed Hal from head to foot as though performing an examination.

(It's almost like they're mad at me, scolding me for being insensitive.)

("Almost" is redundant, imbecile. As a person, righteous fury is the only proper response to a fool who escaped a dragon's jaws yet failed to get in touch.)

Hal could not help but mutter, thus earning a response of exasperation.

Hearing a non-human spirit discuss behavior "as a person," Hal felt rather indignant.

Looking at Asya and Orhime's expressions of serious anger, Hal hunched his neck.

In the worst case, this self-styled Hinokagutsuchi could very well be right...

Part 3

"That should be enough practice by now, shouldn't it? Haruga-kun, please read out your reflection statement for us."

"Uh, 'I am truly sorry for worrying everyone. I will refrain from this type of neglect henceforth, always remembering to report back, make contact and discuss with you at all times, to act with self-awareness as a member of team'..."

"Totally no good. Lacking in both sincerity and ardor."

"This proves that you still don't understand your position. Oh, Haruomi, please don't relax your sitting posture without permission. You've been sitting formally in seiza for merely half an hour. How undisciplined."

Although he finally made it back home, Hal still did not have permission to enter the house.

He was forced into kneeling outside his own home—in seiza posture in front of the entrance—enduring scolding from both Orihime and Asya, then having to write a reflection statement and recite it.

According to the girls:

'If you were safe and sound, why didn't you inform us swiftly in detail!?'

After sending out the brief text to report his survival, Hal had switched off his cellphone and gone to sleep. He was in no mood to talk to anyone because too many things had happened.

This careless act had apparently offended the girls greatly.

Hal kept his head down while listening respectfully to the double serving of lecturing. He had no other recourse. In any case, he was constantly urged to reflect on his own behavior.

Soon after, seeing Hal acting obediently, Orihime sighed deeply.

"No matter what, I am very glad you're safe and sound, Haruga-kun. Also, I really must thank you."

"Huh?"

"Thank you for yesterday. The fact that I am standing here alive right now is partially thanks to Asya-san while the other half is thanks to you, Haruga-kun."

Orihime suddenly stopped lecturing and switched to expressing her gratitude. This unexpected attack instantly rendered Hal speechless. To be thanked so directly by someone—It felt very awkward.

Unable to come up with a good response, Hal could only scratch his head while pretending not to hear.

"I'll only say this here, but actually, I cried a bit once I found out you were safe and sound, Haruga-kun. I really was very worried, so please don't do something like this again, okay?"

Orihime's honest attitude surprised Hal.

It felt like she was giving him both the carrot and the stick with great finesse. At this moment, even Asya started talking frantically:



"I-I'll only say this here as well, okay? Actually, once I found out you were safe and sound, Haruomi, I also cried on the bed until my pillow was completely drenched!"

"Who are you kidding, Asya? That's totally impossible for you."

"Why are you able to respond so calmly to me!?"

"We go way back. By this point, you're not going to cry over something like this, right..."

Hal answered like this precisely because he knew that his childhood friend possessed incomparable courage. However, Asya seemed inexplicably indignant while Orihime chuckled with a smile.

Hence, the atmosphere relaxed and Hal was finally allowed to enter the house.

After opening the front door to enter the western mansion that resembled a haunted house, Orihime was the first to frown and remark, "What a messy home you have, Haruga-kun."

"Really? I'm quite comfortable living here."

"After all, Haruomi is someone completely foreign to cleaning and tidying..."

"Just for the record, if that describes me, Asya is not much better either."

After entering the entrance hall, many stacks of cardboard boxes could be seen.

This included belongings Hal had sent back when returning home for the first time in three years, his late father's possessions and collections that he still had not organized, as well as various objects and articles that had accumulated from inhabitants of the Haruga household before his father.

All such articles were piled up everywhere in the house without any organization.

Hal made his way to the living room with Orihime and Asya following behind.

"By the way, Haruomi, how did you escape from that elite dragon called Soth?"

"I'd like to know too. Everyone says that survival is normally impossible."

Hal was suddenly confronted with two additional queries pointing straight to the heart of the matter.

Hal stepped past the mess of cardboard boxes that made the living room look like a storeroom while answering fluently. He had already prepared an explanation beforehand.

"Another dragon showed up after that. Those two dragons apparently rubbed each other the wrong way and started fighting among themselves. In the end, Soth got injured and fled while the other dragon... died. The giant pillar of fire happened during the battle."

Hal simply glossed over the details without revealing the entire truth.

He wanted to conduct an investigation and get more information out of Hinokagutsuchi first before telling others. Also, he did not know if anyone was going to believe him even if he came clean with the truth.

Asya was shocked after listening to Hal's convenient explanation.

"I can't believe something like that happened!?"

"I definitely wouldn't have survived if things weren't that fortunate."

Hal commented helplessly on purpose instead of belaboring the point.

"Indeed that's true..."

The childhood friend murmured, perhaps feeling convinced.

"But I'm really happy to hear that Soth is injured. That means he might have run off to other lands to wait for his wounds to heal."

Hal secretly recalled in fear: 'I swear I shall revisit again, to have you drawn and quartered!'

He remembered Soth's ominous declaration.

"Actually, Hiiragi-san just called me to make a request. As a precaution against the elite dragon that appeared yesterday, she hopes that I could stay inside the Mansion on standby."

"I heard that Hazumi is there too."

Orihime nodded. The trio sat down on the sofa for now.

The room was covered in dust and things were in an utter mess. Natural lighting was insufficient due to the tightly drawn curtains. Although it was nowhere near comfortable, at least the living room had a sofa to sit on at least.

"Hazumi?"

Hearing the name mentioned by Orihime for the first time, Hal could not help but tilt his head in puzzlement.

"She's my younger cousin and the only witch at New Town—or rather, the entire Kantou region. Minadzuki, who saved us last time, is her partner."

"To give rise to two witches from a single clan, your family line must be particularly blessed with this type of natural aptitude."

"I don't really know about that, but Hazumi has been working for the past two years, ever since she was twelve. But she's a very gentle person with frail health as well, so it seems like she's not quite suited for 'battle'..."

"Would she be very similar to you by any chance? I mean in terms of personality."

From Hal's perspective, Juujouji Orihime's temperament was not suitable for a witch.

Was her cousin one of the same mold? However, Orihime refuted Hal's speculation with a shake of her head.

"Completely unlike. Because she's an angel."

"...Huh?"

Hal could not help but question Orihime's strange description.

"I said angel. She is a girl with a personality as wonderful as an angel's. Kind, gentle and not calculating. Although she's a bit introverted, her smile is very dazzling. A very likable child."

"Oh."

"Any old man, no matter how eccentric or obstinate, would treat her tenderly like a beloved grandchild."

"Juujouji, what you've said is physically impossible. In our filthy realm of humans, the creature of fantasy known as 'an angel' does not exist."

Hal firmly raised his objections against Orihime's murmurings.

"The depths of that girl's heart must be seething with pitch-black and negative emotions like lava, waiting for a chance to explode. Heed my advice. It's not good for a girl to suffer during the prime of her teenage years by projecting her own bias onto others through delusional rose-tinted glasses."

"Let's see if you can still insist on your twisted logic after you actually meet her."

Confidently dismissing Hal's opinion, Orihime took out her cellphone.

"See, this is Hazumi's photo. Isn't she cute?"

"A-A pretty girl huh..."

Taking the cellphone to have a look, Asya murmured.

Displayed on the LCD screen was a young girl smiling demurely with delicate and proper-looking facial features. Her silky hair was shoulder length.

Her uniform was that of Kogetsu Academy's. Indeed, she was very cute.

And that was not all. There was a certain sense of transparency in her facial expression. That vigorous gaze was deeply memorable.

Hal could not help but feel attracted to her eyes. Hence he nodded vigorously and said, "Later, could you tell me what photo retouching software was used and who did the editing?"

"This photo was taken by my cellphone without going through any editing at all. My, you're really on guard, Haruga-kun... Anyway, she is a gentle girl and I don't want her to do too many dangerous things."

Orihime made a melancholic look as though worrying.

"After finding out I had the talent to be a witch, I was thinking I could finally reduce her burden—But the ritual ended up failing."

" "Ugh..." "

Hal and Asya groaned in unison. Seeing as this was a special exception where an elite dragon had shown up, it could not be helped even if the ritual failed.

But even so, it was still an experience that slightly wounded Hal and Asya's pride.

"By the way, Juujouji, let me return this to you."

Hal handed over the intact white copper mirror which Orihime received using a handkerchief before wrapping it up and putting it away in her bag.

"Thank you, Haruga-kun. By the way, can this be used again to perform a covenant ritual—to create my 'serpent' again?"

"It's basically possible... But I think it'll take some time."

Orihime asked with a solemn expression and Asya replied equally seriously.

"Because the ritual was interrupted, the leviathan's 'shadow' born for you, Orihime-san, was unable to materialize. Searching for that shadow which is wandering the present world in spiritual form and summoning it would require quite a troublesome ritual. It needs a lot of time and patience..."

"Then after that, you need to wait for an unknown number of months before the new 'serpent' can be born..."

Like his childhood friend, Hal's tone of voice had also become very gloomy.

The synthesis ritual for creating leviathans required the Grandmother Immortal—namely, the mysterious magic device kept dormant in the underground of Istanbul.

But it could only be used every one or two months, so waiting in a queue was necessary.

"...I understand. I will wait patiently."

Orihime sighed, perhaps feeling disheartened. However, she immediately looked up.

"Then let's shelve that matter for now and decide what we need to do today. Next, I'd like to give this home a thorough cleaning and tidying. May I? Haruga-kun."

"Why do you want to clean my house, Juujouji?"

"Although it might sound a bit much coming from myself, I am someone who loves cleanliness and I like to clean... It'd be a true shame to miss out on a home that needs cleaning as much as this."

Orihime swept her gaze around the Haruga residence's chaotic and messy living room with heartfelt emotion.

"Since there's a bit of time right now, I hope you'll indulge my cleaning obsession. May I?"

"We were just talking about how the ritual cannot be held immediately. How did things suddenly lead to cleaning?"

Also, in Hal's view, he did not find his home uncomfortable at all.

As a teenage boy who had no desire to live in a house resembling a model home, Hal felt that leaving things the way they were would be fine—But Orihime simply said, "Oh, it has nothing to do with the ritual. I just happen to be free today. Haruga-kun, could you tell me the time right now?"

"It's currently 10:28am."

Hal confirmed the time on his cellphone. Orihime smiled deliberately and nodded.

Only then did Hal realize that Asya was wearing a very short one-piece dress with black leggings. For some reason, she was also wearing a khaki military parka on top, which looked quite out of place.

However, Orihime was dressed in school uniform. It was clearly past the time for lessons to start...

"Umm..."

"I wanted to check on your situation before going to school this morning, Haruga-kun, so I picked a time to meet up with Asya-san. But you still had not returned home then, Haruga-kun, and your cellphone was off. Left without any choice, I decided to skip school to confirm your safety."

"..."

"Consequently, I am free for the entire day. It would be a bit strange to go to school at this hour, so allow me to occupy myself here. Thanks for having me."

As far as Hal could remember, Orihime seemed to have maintained perfect attendance with zero lates and absences.

In the absence of unexpected events, this perfect attendance would probably have persisted matter-of-factly until the end of the school year. However, the exalted Princess with her exemplary standards of conduct had decided to skip school on account of Haruga Haruomi...

Orihime had not said anything that resembled complaining.

However, Hal definitely felt like something was stuck in his throat—

"...Sure, thanks."

"Really? Wonderful. This kind of place, which could serve as a gathering venue, really makes me want to clean it up. May I bring stuff over in the future? Like tea or snacks for example."

"Uh, did you say gathering venue!?"

"Yes. Haruga-kun, Asya-san and me. Shouldn't we make effective use of this place for the aforementioned to have gatherings? Also, we don't have to be concerned about others if we meet here. Oh right, I'll be bringing Hazumi, the one I mentioned earlier, to visit in the near future."

Orihime explained her plans with an easygoing rhythm.

It was a blueprint of the future that Hal would stay away from, given his plans to retreat from Tokyo, but—

"Right... I believe that it's better for Haruomi to be assisting us more proactively. Isn't this a great idea?"

Asya nodded on her own. Judging by her tone of voice, she seemed to be emphasizing "assisting me" more than "assisting us." This was probably not Hal's imagination.

"Then please tell me where the cleaning equipment is kept. If there's anything missing—although this house feels like it's definitely missing something—I'll buy it later."

"Orhime-san, why don't you leave matters like purchasing to Haruomi?"

"No, Haruga-kun is probably very tired so we must let him rest. If it's okay with you, Asya-san, please head over to Hazumi's side for me."

Ignoring the master of the house, Orihime and Asya were getting to work harmoniously. The two girls had apparently become good friends after merely one night. This was probably thanks to sharing a battlefield experience together.

Despite being in his own house, Hal experienced an outsider kind of feeling.

Part 4

"Orihime-san seems to know quite well how to handle you, Haruomi."

Asya spoke up after accompanying Hal to his study that also served as a bedroom.

Orhime had gone to a nearby supermarket to shop. Although she had told him to rest, Hal still asked 'Need any help?'

'It's okay. Judging from this home's tragic state, Haruga-kun, you seem more than likely to be someone who's of no help in cleaning. I can probably handle things on my own, so don't feel obliged, just rest as much as you can.'

Hence, Hal decided to standby in his own room.

That being said, the previous conversation was possibly the manner in which Orihime showed her care for others—Feeling as though someone had persistently shone a dazzling bright light in his eye, Hal replied to Asya with slight displeasure:

"What do you mean by how to handle me?"

"Being too meddlesome doesn't work. Too much laissez-faire doesn't work either. You're really troublesome as an opponent, Haruomi."

Asya giggled with a smile, puffing out her flat chest at the same time.

It was like she was showing off the fact that she had known such a person for the longest time.

"I'm not some kind of troublesome opponent. Essentially, I like it best when people leave me alone... However, Juujouji sure is a strange girl for wanting to clean up this house."

Hal whispered with heartfelt emotion.

"I'm really quite surprised. I never thought I'd get to know someone who seems to have a very high level of femininity."

"...Haruomi? Did you just say something?"

Hal repeated his thought verbatim, resulting in an inexplicable expression of shock on Asya's face.

"A very high level of femininity?"

"Yes, that. What do you mean by saying something like that in front of the girl who is your closest friend!? I-I-I-It's almost like you're saying that I'm very low on femininity..."

"But it's actually true that you're very low on femininity. Isn't that right, Asya?"

Regarding the issue of being close friends, Hal had no trouble admitting it.

But he could hardly agree with the latter half of her argument.

"You never care about accommodation conditions no matter what country you're staying in. You're unfazed by total messes, simply dismissing them as something to get used to with time."

Asya was supposed to be quite wealthy.

However, she never insisted on living in high-class residential areas or luxury apartments. For the most part, she would choose one-room units in housing complexes with simple furnishings.

"W-What does that have to do with anything? Whether awake or asleep, a human should not have any problem coping with just a rug-sized area. Also, it's not like anyone would die if I didn't clean for half a year... Anyway, femininity is the more important issue at hand."

The childhood friend coughed to clear her throat.

"Putting the matter of lifestyle aside for now, I must point out that food is my area of expertise. Surely you must know my cooking skills very well, Haruomi?"

"Yes, that's one thing I've never forgotten."

Asya's cooking was definitely very authentic indeed.

After all, she was even capable of carrying out the task of "slaughtering live poultry and processing it into meat products" to perfection. Not to mention taking up a hunting rifle personally to shoot down wild birds for ingredients...

Consequently, compared to femininity, what Hal experienced was more of an exuberant sense of wild vitality.

If fairies were residents of mountains, forests and other natural habitats, then this childhood friend frequently acted as befitted a child of nature, even appearance included.

"In that case, give me a moment!"

Asya spoke with her face tense.

"It's almost time for lunch. I'll prepare delicious food to treat you, so please correct your assessment that my femininity loses out to Orihime-san."

"Sounds like a very tough challenge..."

"Don't worry, I'll make a show of the dormant abilities I've kept hidden!"

"But don't you need to head over to the Mansion later?"

"It's not like there's an emergency. Going later should be fine. Then I'm going out to shop for ingredients!"

Saying that, Asya trotted over to the study's door.

But just as she was about to step out into the corridor, she looked back at him again.

"Oh by the way, j-just to be clear, I'm not trying to act feminine in front of you, Haruomi, just because I'm feeling competitive against Orihime-san. My hand is simply forced as a matter of female pride..."

"Really? Sure, got it. I almost misunderstood."

Hal nodded generously in response to his childhood friend's intentional and supplementary explanation.

For some reason, this caused Asya's eyes to look like those of an injured puppy's. Glaring at Hal, she said "I-I'm heading out" and left the room.

"...I guess Asya's still quite concerned about appearances as a girl."

Muttering, Hal sat down in front of the computer desk.

After he moved the mouse, the computer was roused from sleep mode and the screen lit up.

"I really hope there's something in Pops' database that could shed light on what happened last night..."

Although Orihime had asked him to rest, Hal had difficult circumstances of his own that prevented him from heeding her.

Searching the computer where his father's book collection and research notes were stored as well as the connected external storage device, Hal started his investigation.

The transformation of his body into something weird had taken place the previous night.

Even if just a little, was there any hint existing somewhere that could unravel the mystery?

Since everything had started with the "stone" in his late father's memento, Hal felt hopeful.

Speaking of which, where had the greatest source of information, Hinokagutsuchi run off to? Just as Hal recalled the self-styled devil whom he had neither heard nor seen for quite a while...

"Kyahhhhhhh!?"

"Juujuuji!?"

Hearing a scream, Hal instantly stood up.

There should not be anything dangerous inside the house. However, the matter of Raak Al Soth remained unresolved, so there was no guarantee that the dragon would not devote his full effort towards locating Hal to launch an attack...

Worrying about the worst scenario, Hal ran towards the sound—Hal's living room.

"What happened!?"

Hal asked with intensity. Orihime was standing still in shock with a dazed expression.

Having taken off her uniform jacket, she had her white shirt sleeves rolled up and a duster in hand. In a corner of the living room, a bucket and a cloth were also lying ready.

She did not have any obvious external injuries. Orihime looked unharmed all over.

"Oh, I'm really sorry for screaming so loudly. Did I scare you?"

"...Not too badly. Did you see a mouse?"

Although it was a bit anticlimactic, Hal still asked. This home was not only old but had been left neglected until recently.

It would not be strange for that type of creature to be present but Orihime shook her head. After pondering for a while, she drew herself next to Hal.

"Umm, Haruga-kun, you previously mentioned curses and hauntings, isn't that right? I am only asking in light of that... By any chance—Would your home have *that*?"

A question without an explicit subject. Orihime seemed to be taking precautions against something.

Seeing his classmate a little nervous, Hal understood the point of her question. At the same time, another possibility occurred to him.

"Could it be that you saw a girl in a red kimono?"

"—Indeed you're correct! Is that a ghost!?"

To think she was able to say the word "ghost" so nonchalantly, Orihime certainly belonged to the same generation as Hal.

After all, they were born and raised during times where dragons were matter-of-fact existences. Even when encountering supernatural phenomena, they were still able to quickly calm themselves.

"Oh... What is that thing? I'm not too sure either. Besides, I've only seen it two or three times, that's all..."

Hal glossed over things in a vague answer. On a basic level, he was not lying.

"I see. But she actually said some strange things to me."

"Strange things?"

"Yes. Along the lines of 'Do you want a serpent?' There was also a whole bunch of other stuff but I was too surprised and failed to take it all in."

Rather than getting seen by accident, she was approaching Orihime with ulterior motives?

Suspecting Hinokagutsuchi's intentions, Hal could not help but frown in deep thought. At this time, he heard a patter of footsteps along the corridor.

"Haruomi and Orihime-san, Hiiragi-san just sent a notice!"

Asya rushed in, panting.

She was supposed to have gone shopping, but Hal did not see any bag in her hand. Asya had probably turned back before she entered the shop.

With a foreboding feeling in his heart, Hal turned his gaze to the childhood friend. Orihime followed suit.

"The elite dragon that had appeared in Old Tokyo last night is now located. The Mansion at Shin-Kiba. He apparently attacked the Mansion an hour ago and occupied it. I heard that Orihime-san's cousin, who happened to be at the scene, was captured along with her 'serpent.'"

Normally, Asya would probably be in a state of panic and utter confusion.

But in times like these, the childhood friend never lost her cool. In order to prepare for the imminent battle, she had already entered her "emergency" mode.

Awe inspiring, fearless, flawless, calm and composed. And as beautiful as a sharp sword.

On the other hand, Orihime was stunned and at a loss what to do after hearing about her cousin's misfortune.

"Hazumi, no way!?"

She was clearly shocked and had lost her direction.

But one could hardly blame her. Orihime was not a witch yet. Her only battle experience was last night where she was the one being protected.

Meanwhile, Hal put on a stiff expression.

What happened last night could not possibly be unrelated to Soth's actions. Rather, it would be the opposite.

Soth's true target was Hal and Hinokagutsuchi, right? Orihime's cousin was simply caught up in the affair—

An hour later, Hal, Orihime and Asya had arrived at the Shin-Kiba area.

The Mansion's vicinity, located near Tokyo Bay, was sealed off by the police and riot squads belonging to that jurisdiction.

Uniformed police officers could be seen all over the place. Judging from their equipment and special vehicles, one could tell that the Metropolitan Police Department had mobilized urban rescue forces.

Currently, all commoners and vehicles were prohibited from entering the area.

The only ones allowed access were "experts" like Asya, invited to resolve the situation.

As soon as they entered the sealed area, a young man immediately walked over to them.

Amidst the many uniformed police officers, he was the only person dressed in an old business suit, looking like a plainclothes detective.

"Hi."

"Kenjou-san? What brings you here?"

Asya stared with widened eyes. Kenjou Genya, manager of the used bookstore Mirokudou as well as a member of SAURU's staff, smiled wryly in turn.

"Under the orders of my boss... Hiiragi-san. She sent me here to support you for now, Asya-san. Let's walk over there before I explain the situation."

Asya, Hal and Orihime followed Kenjou, in that order.

"Let me make this clear first. Don't delude yourself into thinking you can get closer than one kilometer from the Mansion. Terrifying magical power is spread out there so approaching it is already very dangerous."

Kenjou pressed the edge of his hand against his own neck to make a chopping gesture.

What he meant was—Death would result? Hal and Asya nodded silently whereas Orihime scowled.

Leading them, Kenjou brought the trio to a temporary tent.

Placed on the folding table was a map of the area and several pairs of binoculars.

"Use these to look towards the Mansion."

Since there were enough to go around, everyone took up their own pair of binoculars.

Zoned for redevelopment, the area clearly consisted mostly of empty land.

Extremely sparse in buildings and people, there was excellent visibility. The familiar Mansion could be seen clearly through binoculars.

Furthermore, at the seashore some distance away, there was an object that could not be ignored.

Reportedly, the location was reclaimed land that used to be a landfill site.

"That's—Minadzuki!?"

Orihime cried out. A transparent triangular prism was standing on the land next to the sea.

The triangular prism was much smaller than the Monolith towering over Old Tokyo. Roughly thirty meters in height, it looked like a miniature Monolith.

A "serpent" that Hal had seen before was coiled around it.

Her body surface was emerald in color. Serving as the horn counterpart, her right hand and claws were especially large.

It was Minadzuki, the leviathan shaped like an oriental *serpentine dragon*.

Coiled around the transparent equilateral triangular prism, she looked like a snake wrapped around a long rod—In addition, stabbed in her back was a metal needle, even longer than her body length.

Piercing Minadzuki, the needle had her pinned firmly to the mini-Monolith.

"Still alive... Asleep?"

After death, a leviathan's body would disappear from the world.

Seeing Minadzuki's tightly shut eyes, Hal muttered to himself.

"She's been like that all this time, not moving at all. She isn't going into spiritual form either. The elite that took over the Mansion—the bastard called Soth, right? That guy seems to have deployed some kind of magic," reported Kenjou.

Asya also looked intently at the mini-Monolith through binoculars.

Her gaze was cast on a certain surface of the triangular prism. Carved there were fifteen runes of Ruruk Soun.

"Asya, do you know what those runes mean?"

"'Life' and 'spiritual power'... I think that's the rough meaning of this arrangement."

Asya's gaze and expression were very solemn and stern.

Her beautiful face like a fairy's was enhanced by acuity and character. Whenever he witnessed his childhood friend in such a state, Hal would always feel shaken in his heart.

"I-Is Hazumi okay? Given that Minadzuki is already like this—"

"I think she should be unharmed. If anything happened to the witch and covenantee, the 'serpent' would disappear as well," answered Asya with intellect beyond what she usually presented, confronted with the panicking Orihime.

Leviathans were artificial lifeforms without material bodies to begin with. What allowed them to stay in the present world was the covenant between "serpent" and witch. If a witch were to die, nullifying the covenant, the physical body tying the leviathan to the world would naturally collapse—In other words, death would result.

Orihime breathed a sigh of relief. At the same time, Kenjou added extra information:

"Right now, my boss is sending requests to witches and sponsors in various place, asking them to assist in resolving the situation. But since the enemy is elite, everyone seems quite reluctant to step forward."

"The risk of sending out precious 'serpents' is too great, is that it?"

"Oh, Asya-san. Umm..."

Orihime originally wanted to say something to Asya but broke off halfway.

Hal's classmate was considerate of other's feelings despite her upfront personality.

If she were to voice her current thoughts and feelings, perhaps her newfound friend might be forced into hopeless peril. However, Asya never failed to live up to expectations.

She stared at the mini-Monolith and the sleeping "serpent" Minadzuki for quite a while.

Then after turning her gaze to the Mansion and ruminating repeatedly—She slowly began to speak:

"Let this battlefield be Rushalka's final resting place."

Asya's voice was filled with calm determination.

"This might be quite fitting for her that the last enemy is an elite dragon. We still haven't paid Soth back for what he did in Old Tokyo, so let's show him what Rushalka is like when going all out."

Asya was the battle hardened veteran with her stalwart and beautiful partner.

But now, her partner was on the verge of death.

Releasing her power to the limit would probably speed up the collapse of the body that could not bear the strain. Asya must have understood this fact when she declared her decision to fight.

However, how much of Rushalka's "true power" was still retained?

Five minutes, ten minutes, or even a shorter duration... The childhood friend's chances of victory ought to be extremely low.

Part 5

Then the next day, Hal and Orihime went to school as usual.

The number of students in the classroom was only half of the usual.

Due to Soth's lurking presence, Tokyo New Town's administration had issued an evacuation order in the area around Shin-Kiba. Many local residents had left New Town temporarily to seek refuge after learning of this news.

Asya was stationed inside the sealed zone, preparing for a duel against the elite dragon.

Soth and the imprisoned witch, Shirasaka Hazumi, stayed in the Mansion the whole time without appearing once.

However, a changes was occurring with the mini-Monolith and the leviathan Minadzuki.

—A change in color. The mini-Monolith where the "serpent" was pinned was originally a transparent equilateral triangular prism.

But this morning, the transparent pillar had turned into a shade of red reminiscent of blood. What did the color change imply?

Hal wanted to ask Hinokagutsuchi but—

"I've seen neither hide nor hair of her since yesterday... Even though now is the most critical time."

Not long after the lunch break began, Hal was muttering to himself while sitting in his seat in the classroom.

All they could depend on was Asya's "serpent" and nothing else. Apparently, none of the witches capable of supporting her had appeared so far. If the attacking enemies were groups of Raptors, it would be possible to request support from the SDF or the police's urban rescue force, but the opponent this time was an elite dragon.

Elites were able to use hypnosis incantations to plunge entire armies into deep sleep.

They were also capable of spreading death curses, obtaining victory with frightening speed.

When facing such monsters as opponents, commoners would serve as nothing more than sacrifices, being unable to defend against magic. Asya had no choice but to duel the elite dragon alone with her partner—

"Haruga-kun. Here, take this."

Hal suddenly heard a voice by his ear. Orihime was handing over a small cloth bag from her seat as his neighbor.

She had not spoken the whole time since morning. Given what happened to her cousin, it was probably impossible for her to maintain her usual cheerfulness.

However, Orihime was currently staring at Hal with an intense gaze.

Her expression was full of solemnity, as though she had made some kind of monumental decision.

"A packed lunch?"

"I wanted to give you something with more sincerity than last time's bun."

Inside the bag was a lunchbox. Actually, there were two of them.

Opening one of them, Hal found it filled to the brim with rice.

The other lunchbox contained side dishes. There were what appeared to be frozen food that had been deep-fried, salt roasted mackerel that seemed to have been prepared by hand, burdock stir-fried in kinpira style, Chikuzen style chicken and carrot stew, pickled cucumbers, etc. Quite a wide selection of dishes.

"Although I can't measure the sincerity, the food does look like it's worth a try."

"I made it personally, after all, so I'll have you know that there's six times more sincerity than convenience store buns. I was thinking that boys have bigger appetites, so I prepared a large amount."

As a side note, just at this moment...

The noisy classmates in the room during the lunch break—They seemed to have quieted down instantly.

But Hal had more important things to do. Unperturbed, he turned to face Orihime and said, "So what are you apologizing for this time?"

"Rather than an apology, I have a request for you this time."

Orihime's eyes conveyed seriousness on a completely different level from the time when she treated him to a bun.

"May I visit your home after school today, Haruga-kun? You see, I was interrupted in the middle of the cleaning, while there are many other matters also..."

Orihime's choice of words was rather subdued.

However, Hal understood what she wanted to convey.

"Could this be related to what that girl said yesterday?"

"Indeed. Thinking over it after the fact, I noticed she had said many things that are quite concerning. It fine if the answer is no and given the current circumstances, but if there's anything I could do to assist—"

Orihime wanted to contribute. For the sake of rescuing her cousin as well as to avoid shoving all danger upon Asya alone to bear.

Hal could understand her feelings as though they were his own. He nodded deeply.

"Juujuuji, I don't think there's any need to wait until school's over."

"Huh?"

"Let's go to my house now. Who knows how the situation has changed on the other side? It's better to act sooner than later."



Saying that, Hal placed the lunchboxes back into the bag.

Orihime immediately nodded in agreement. Her decisiveness in this area was truly breathtaking.

"I understand. Then let's continue our discussion at your house, Haruga-kun!"

Orihime instantly stuffed her belongings into her schoolbag and started preparing to leave.

Hal surveyed the surroundings.

There were roughly ten classmates in the room. Everyone was looking in his direction with shocked expressions on their faces. In particular, some of the boys were glaring at Hal with piercing stares.

Crap, the discussion about skipping school was too loud, right?

Despite feeling regretful, Hal still spoke to the two girls nearby.

"Mutou-san, Juujouji is suddenly feeling unwell, so could you let the teacher know that we're leaving early? I'm sending her home."

"Oh okay, understood. Leave it to me."

Mutou-san, a member of the UFO Research Club, thumped her chest and promised with a snicker.

"After all, I'm indebted to Juujouji-san and you fascinate me, Haruga-kun. I will cheer for you, so do your best. In return—"

"Put my name on the club entry form. You need a fifth member, right?"

"Fufu, much appreciated!"

"Haruga-kun, I will help too!"

The petite girl next to Mutou-san, Funaki-san, declared.

Staring at Hal and Orihime, her fervent eyes were glimmering brightly.

"Unable to suppress the intense passion in your hearts, the two of you have decided to escape to the ends of the earth, hand in hand! Don't worry, everyone in the class understands!"

"...? Sure, then I'm counting on you two."

After listening to Funaki-san's exaggerated speech, Hal cocked his head then picked up his schoolbag.

Exchanging nods with each other, Hal and Orihime made their way to the classroom's exit together.

Thus, Hal was already home despite the fact that lessons were still in progress.

Arriving at his messy living room together with Orihime, he called out, "You're over here, right? Or have you been sticking to us all along?"

Sweeping his gaze across the living room and the ceiling, Hal raised his voice and yelled at the same time, "I don't care either way, but isn't it time for you to appear? I also brought the girl who caught your eye."

"Fufu. Well done, brat, considering it is you."

Suddenly manifesting, Hinokagutsuchi was smiling.

She was sitting sloppily on an unused table in a corner of the living room.

The hem of her kimono was wide open, exposing a young girl's pale, bare feet.

Hinokagutsuchi slowly reached out and started to play with the black queen piece from the chess set lying on the table.

Witnessing this supernatural entry to the stage, Orihime gasped.

"I knew it, like last time's..."

"O girl who ought to have given birth to a serpent, you have arrived at a good time. Have you resolved yourself to accept my proposal?"

"I can't believe you're making a deal with Juujouji."

Hal scowled.

"A deal?"

Orihime asked in puzzlement after hearing Hal.

"Simply stated, back when Soth was hunting me last time, I was saved thanks to her."

"Then isn't she your savior!?"

"The fact that I cannot assert that is exactly what's subtle about her. Because she cannot be trusted completely, I can hardly recommend her as the counterparty in a deal."

"What are you talking about? At the very least, I used to be an existence known to others as the queen."

Hinokagutsuchi deliberately widened her grin after hearing Hal's comment about her.

"Is it that unreasonable to indulge my naturally mischievous character and toy with the counterparty of a deal every now and then? Perhaps I might suggest flawed ideas to innocent children so as to watch with amusement as they run around all over the place. Nevertheless, I have never gone back on a promise."

"What naturally mischievous character, you're nowhere innocent enough for that description to apply..."

Ignoring the muttering Hal, Orihime faced Hinokagutsuchi squarely and stared at her.

"You... said so yesterday, didn't you? 'If you want your serpent, I shall summon it in exchange for the pain of childbirth' or something to that effect."

"Yes. If you wish, I can lend you my wisdom and power."

In the Old Testament of the Bible, the serpent had tempted Eve to eat the apple—

Hinokagutsuchi's diabolical tone of voice reminded Hal of that scene.

"The spirit of the *imitation* that was born for your sake that night... Even now, it still lingers here. It will certainly hurry forth if I were to summon it. However, what follows is the challenge. If the power, the brat's and mine, were to

become depleted, then it is difficult to say whether this *imitation* can be born in the present world—"

"A-Are there conditions...?"

"Yes. Come over here and bring your ear up close."

The sitting Hinokagutsuchi whispered with her lips by the side of Orihime's ear, meanwhile displaying charms beyond her apparent age.

"Eh!?"

Orihime suddenly cried out with her face turned bright red.

"O-Of course Haruga-kun must be asked to leave when the time comes, right!?"

"Do not be silly. If this method is employed to facilitate the new birth, the brat is essential. He must take out the 'child' from your abdomen."

"—!?"

Orihime was holding her breath as though she was about to faint. Let alone her face, even her neck had turned bright red.

For some reason, Hal could understand why.

It was a response of embarrassment and shock. Hinokagutsuchi was most likely imparting onto Orihime mad words that resembled sexual harassment. Just as Hal decided to say a few words to reprimand her—

"Please! L-Let me consider for a while."

Saying that, Orihime rushed out into the corridor.

To think she could lose her usual cool—Hal turned his gaze to glare intensely at Hinokagutsuchi while chastising her, "Don't make excessively weird demands from Juujouji, okay?"

"What are you referring to? To be able to obtain an *imitation* in exchange for momentary pain, this deal is certainly favorable for the girl. Also, brat—"

Hinokagutsuchi spoke to Hal.

"That dragon called Soth apparently intends to seek revenge against you. Invading that whatever Mansion was also for this purpose, yes? That fellow is currently ingesting the blood of the captured *imitation*."

"Drinking blood, you say?"

"For dragonkind, the blood of female dragons or similar lifeforms are akin to a wonder drug with a multitude of uses. Used as a drastic measure, it can temporarily augment their powers. It can also be used as an elixir to cure the heavy injuries you inflicted."

"..."

"Although I have no idea whether you intend to enter the fray or not, that girl seems to have resolved herself to fight. Isn't it only human nature to want to extend a helping hand?"

Clearly not a human, yet Hinokagutsuchi was talking about "human nature."

A subtle smile surfaced on her lips as though trying to test Hal's mettle.

Damn it. Feeling his sense of oppositional defiance getting provoked, Hal shook his head and decided to forget it.

This kind of thing did not matter. In comparison, what he ought to care about was the girl who was suffering because of him, as well as the childhood friend who was in danger...

"Let me ask a question just for reference. How far can that supernatural resilience endure?"

"What do you mean by how far?"

"For example, being unaffected even if exposed to a death incantation spread by Soth or something like that."

Hinokagutsuchi did not answer the question. Instead, she reached for the dust-covered chessboard.

Picking up the white king, she moved it forward by one square. The square was occupied by the black queen. Putting down the king piece, she picked up the queen instead.

"Achieving something of that level is not a problem. Probably."

"That doesn't count as an answer..."

"Just as you have discerned, although I am full of wisdom, my disposition can hardly be described as that of an instructor. Besides, I have no obligation to guide you with care and diligence. This is enough."

Hinokagutsuchi threw something at him.

Hal caught it reflexively. It was the queen she had just picked up, the most powerful piece in this board game of chess—

"I don't suppose you know how chess is played, do you?"

"All things considered, I consider myself a studious learner at least. I have accumulated a certain level of contemporary knowledge, you know?"

A dragon's ghost with a young girl's appearance but calling herself the devil.

Was she really centuries or millennia in age? Just as Hal doubted, Orihime returned with her face all red. Then approaching Hal's chest, she said:

"Listen carefully, Haruga-kun. What we are going to do next is the same as a medical procedure, got that!?"

"? What do you mean by that, Juujouji?"

"The details can wait until we start. In any case, I trust you, Haruga-kun. If you get any indecent thoughts, I will absolutely become disillusioned with you, so be careful!"

Acting uncharacteristically, Orihime had become very tyrannical.

This was probably for hiding her embarrassment. Intimidated by her vigor, Hal responded with "O-Okay" in agreement.

Watching this scene with a teasing gaze, Hinokagutsuchi then whispered quietly, "Then let us depart. Towards the locate where all destinies began—"

Her voice sounded slightly sacred and solemn, unlike the tone of a self-styled devil with a malicious mouth.

Chapter 5 – Akuro-Ou, and the Bow Star of the Southern Sky

Part 1

"But Haruga-kun, your preparations turned out to be quite meticulous," commented Orihime from the front passenger seat.

This prompted Hal to answer "What?" from the driver's seat.

Carrying the two of them, the car passed through Ryougoku Bridge's gate and sped along Yasukuni Street in Old Tokyo. Hal had called Kenjou to borrow his personally owned car.

"You had this access pass prepared ahead of time even before you decided to go to Old Tokyo, didn't you? Isn't it very time consuming to obtain this sort of thing?"

"Oh... Actually, it's nothing special."

It was after Hal and Orihime skipped school and met Hinokagutsuchi at the Haruga residence.

Picking up the readied car and documents at the Mirokudou that was closed for business in the manager's absence, the two of them then proceeded directly to Old Tokyo.

"Forging documents is easy because there's a replica of the verification stamp and lots of equipment at the SAURU branch we just visited. There are very few people who would want illegal entry into a Concession's wasteland, so naturally, there are many openings to exploit."

"So the people of SAURU all operate in a suspicious gray area..."

Hearing Orihime's murmuring, Hal retracted his neck.

After all, Hal was what Hiiragi-san called a "professional treasure hunter." Due to this line of work, he had become acquainted with many people involved with the organized theft of international artwork. As a result, Hal was quite aware of his position in a gray area lying closer to black.

While they were chatting, the car continued to advance without impediment. The sun was about to set.

"By the way, about Hinokagutsuchi—Kagutsuchi-san..."

On her own, Orihime had assigned a nickname to the spirit that looked like a young girl.

Even when facing something non-human, Orihime's special ability of rapidly getting acquainted still seemed to be intact.

"Why does she want to help me and you, Haruga-kun?"

"You should ask her directly. But don't expect her to give a serious answer."

(Oh my oh my, you refuse to believe that I am offering assistance out of noble-minded benevolence?)

Hinokagutsuchi's voice suddenly interjected into the conversation.

"After all, there are too many suspicious things about you... I probably would have ignored you if it wasn't a crisis of life and death."

Hal's grumbling elicited laughter of mockery from Hinokagutsuchi.

(Fufufufu, don't say it like that. I will be secretly watching over you at least, until the day you die out there in a ditch somewhere.)

"Rather than a guardian angel who only watches, I'd prefer a numinous spirit that prevents me from dying out in the wild..."

Soon after, the car arrived near the destination.

The place where Hal had rolled in pain all over the floor—Tokyo Station.

Hal and Orihime entered the station through the Marunouchi entrance.

It was the place where Soth had fought against Hinokagutsuchi's remains last time.

The dome-shaped ceiling of duralumin towered majestically above, still retaining a style befitting what used to be the entrance of a major terminal station.

Although there was no illumination, the interior of the station was still relatively bright.

Light from outside was streaming in due to the damage Soth had inflicted upon the walls using his massive body and powerful strength.

"My remains only collapsed and scattered not too long ago. Right now, just by gathering the remnants of my power lingering here, it is enough to carry out the birth ritual."

Materializing, Hinokagutsuchi spoke softly in a solemn tone of voice.

In the next instant, Hal felt an intense chill down his spine. He could feel a massive amount of magical power flowing here from the depths of the station—flowing towards the vicinity of the girl who called herself the devil.

This magical power was so dense that it was frightening, even to the point that it felt like one could touch it by hand.

"W-What is this feeling...?"

Orihime also felt quite unsettled. As expected of a witch candidate, she was quite sensitive towards magic.

On the other hand, Hinokagutsuchi nostalgically looked around the space that was overflowing with magical power like miasma.

"I seem to recall that the *imitation* created by contemporary humans is called a leviathan? Using that kind of spell to revive it is not a bad idea, but there is a flaw."

Smiling mysteriously, Hinokagutsuchi proceeded to explain tirelessly.

Orange sunlight shone into the station. The sun was apparently starting to set.

"Using contemporary methods, the connection between the 'serpent' and the sacrifice's priestess is not strong. Once the priestess falls into darkness and strays from the proper path, she becomes unable to draw out any significant

power. That is insufficient. Furthermore, it is a principle of nature that the sacred light of the priestess can be used to bring the demonic 'serpent' closer to divinity..."

Compared to the age of myths and ancient times, modern humans' disposition towards magic was rather dismal.

Hal recalled what his father had said in the past.

"This time, I shall edify the two of you on ancient ways—Come, O wandering spirit of the young serpent, the priestess whom you ought to follow is here. Make haste and heed the queen's summons."

Mid-sentence, Hinokagutsuchi's voice turned into a shout. Then immediately—
A "shadow" started occupying a spot in the station where the setting sun's rays did not reach.

It was the silhouette of a giant beast. The outline resembled that of a quadrupedal mammal. Overall, it looked quite slender and seemed to be carrying something huge on its back.

"Isn't this the shadow of the 'serpent' which Asya-san summoned on that night...?"

"I can't believe it got called here so easily..."

Hinokagutsuchi instantly said to the surprised Orihime and Hal, "Very well, it is finally time to begin the final stage. Brat, hold the divine artifact. Girl, hurry and strip."

" "....." "

Hal and Orihime fell silent simultaneously. Regarding the "ritual" that was about to take place, they had already heard the explanation during the car trip. Although they had already acquired full understanding of the procedure, whether they were mentally prepared for it or not was a separate matter...

Orihime fidgeted awkwardly, hesitating for quite a while before suddenly turning to stare at Hal shyly.

"U-Umm, Haruga-kun, just like you promised, do not look until it starts. Otherwise, I will probably hate you for a lifetime. Before I say ready, you must keep facing the other way!"

"I-I got it."

Hal frantically shifted his gaze away from Orihime and turned his head to the side.

After a while, he could hear the sound of friction from the fabric of clothing. Then there was the sound of light fabric sliding to the ground. She was undressing.

In order to let the entire body feel and accept the spiritual energy of the "serpent," all unnecessary clothing was probably removed—

This was what Hinokagutsuchi called the "necessary reason."

"Hmm. I knew it... Just as I predicted. O priestess, your physical maturation is excellent."

"K-Kagutsuchi-san, don't suddenly say such strange things!"

"Why are you angry? I am praising you earnestly and sincerely. Fufufu, feeding from those spectacular breasts, your babies will undoubtedly grow up healthy and strong. That waist is also the narrow type, my favorite... Yet such a voluptuous posterior... Bearing any number of children will not be a problem like this. Yes."

"Hold on, this must be sexual harassment! Kagutsuchi-san, there's a boy listening on the side!"

"Fufu. Even if you protest against whatever sexual harassment, I have totally no idea what the term means."

Despite boasting of being a diligent learner and even knowing what chess was, she feigned ignorance, only intent on teasing others.

As much as he sympathized with Orihime, Hal remained indecisive whether he should cover up his ears. To be honest, his curiosity was extremely piqued,

overwhelming him with the desire to transform his entire body into ears to listen carefully.

"Very well, this level of undressing is sufficient. Turn your head here, brat—"

"Not yet! I still haven't prepared myself. Ooh, this level of exposure is similar to a swimsuit's, relax, relax... Haruga-kun, y-you may look this way now..."

Having obtained permission, Hal slowly turned his head over.

The setting sun's orange rays were shining into the ruins. A maiden with a wonderful figure was currently standing there, instilling in the viewer an irrepressible urge to call her a goddess of beauty. Naturally, she was Orihime.

Even covered by underwear, her glamorous physique could still be seen clearly.

In this state of undress, Orihime was standing there frozen in embarrassment.

She still had her uniform shirt hanging on her shoulders, but it was draped like a cape without any of the buttons fastened. Hence, if anything, the shirt had almost no effect in reducing the nudity level, instead contributing to a slight element of atypical seductiveness.

Hal almost gave in to the urge to lean forward suddenly. He frantically restrained himself.

However, Orihime had already seen through the thoughts in his heart.

"Haruga-kun... Although you are making a serious face, aren't your eyes glimmering subtly?"

"No, well—I am a healthy high school boy, after all."

"S-Shouldn't you attempt to lie in this kind of situation, even if just going through the motions!?"

"Hmm, these scraps of fabric might possibly get in the way... O priestess, remove them—"

"I'm not going to strip, Kagutsuchi-san! I absolutely won't strip!"

After a commotion took place...

Under Hinokagutsuchi's directions, Orihime obediently lay down with great reluctance.

In the end, lying in front of Hal was a beautiful girl of the same age with an uncommonly outstanding figure.

With her left knee raised, Orihime was peering at Hal's expression. At the same time, her cheeks were scarlet from embarrassment.

Her bust, very well developed despite her young age of fifteen, was bulging up firmly despite her lying down position. One could feel a kind of tender bursting tension.

Perhaps—No, undoubtedly they must be F-cups...

Hal's speculation turned into certainty.

"H-Haruga-kun!? You were just nodding very seriously. You wouldn't be thinking of something weird by any chance, right!?"

"Juujuuji, I'm sure you should have noticed by now. Despite appearances, I am actually a covert perv—"

"I don't want to listen. I already understand fully that you're a boy, Haruga-kun, so please stop saying things that will make others embarrassed~~!"

While arguing with Orihime, Hal did not forget to start working dutifully at the same time.

Held in his left hand was the white copper mirror—the Grave Good or magical apparatus for enshrined object emulation—that had caught Soth's eye.

It was the divine artifact with historical roots, to be used as the newborn leviathan's Heartmetal, and was brought by Orihime.

As soon as the mirror was taken out, the "shadow" in the depths of station instantly shook.

The leviathan spirit born for Orihime's sake—the quadrupedal beast's silhouette—was overjoyed to find the divine artifact for it to possess.

Then Hinokagutsuchi's delicate hand reached out to touch the mirror of white copper.

Instantly, the mirror in Hal's hand began to burn, enveloped in scarlet flames.

Seeing the mirror burning, Orihime went through a violent shudder while waiting out front. Knowing what was to come in the procedure, she was probably afraid.

But after drawing in a deep breath, she looked up at Hal with moistened eyes and said, "Y-You may put it in, Haruga-kun... Please..."

Her voice trembled slightly but carried firm resolution.

Hal moved the burning mirror towards Orihime's pale abdomen. Her tight and slender waist was very seductive.

Together with his left hand, Hal inserted the mirror into her belly.

"—Hoo."

Orihime's beautiful face became contorted, displaying an expression of pain. Surely it was very painful.

Hal recalled the pain he had experienced last time at this same venue. Instantly, he wanted to withdraw his left hand and take out the mirror.

Although it was unknown whether she had sensed his movement, Orihime reached out and grabbed Hal's right hand.

"Don't worry. I'm okay, so persist until the very end... Haruga-kun."

"Juujouji!"



Orihime's delicate hand was gripping Hal's right hand with astounding strength.

She was probably trying to endure the pain in desperation. By the time he noticed, Orihime was covered in sweat, her entire body drenched, glimmering under the red rays of the setting sun.

She was panting and had hollow eyes out of focus.

Her grip on Hal's right hand gradually weakened but her breathing began to slow down. It looked like she was growing accustomed to the pain.

With glazed eyes, Orihime looked up at Hal.

Hal nodded at her. Although she was still suffering, Orihime smiled bravely.

Then—

The white copper mirror, which Hal had inserted into Orihime's abdomen, changed in form. The object grasped in his left hand felt completely different from before.

Hal immediately withdrew his left hand.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Orihime screamed loudly—But this was supposed to be the last sensation of pain.

Seeing the object he had taken out with his left hand, Hal nodded. The white copper mirror had transformed completely, turned into a white metallic sphere.

Despite being only palm-sized, it was quite heavy.

Altering in shape and properties while within Orihime's body, it had transformed into the leviathan's core, the Heartmetal.

Then the metallic sphere floated up into the air on its own and was gradually absorbed into the quadrupedal beast's shadow.

In the next instant, the shadow acquired material form.

The quadrupedal beast was canid in appearance but impossible to categorize further as either a wolf or a fox. Its massive body was covered entirely in white fur, but under the illumination of light, there was a crimson glow released as well.

Furthermore, there were nine tails.

Nine long and thick tails sprouted from the body. Wriggling independently as though they had their own wills, the tails moved like serpents.

Carrying nine serpentine tails, a vulpine-lupine leviathan.

This was Orihime's partner.

"Are you willing to fight alongside me...?"

Despite her disheveled state of attire, Orihime got up unsteadily.

The newly born "serpent" cried out. It was the sound of a puppy begging for the owner's attention.

The giant fox-wolf's affectionate behavior caused Orihime's lips to smile naturally.

"Fufu... You must name this little one. O priestess, have you any ideas?"

Perhaps feeling satisfied by the result, Hinokagutsuchi was smiling.

"Umm, I can't think of one on the spot... But I'd prefer a cooler name. This child seems to be a cool beauty, so I think that kind of name would suit her better."

"A beauty huh... Well, I guess I can't disagree."

Hal nodded while agreeing with Orihime and gazing up at the majestic appearance of the "serpent."

The fox-wolf's demeanor was proper and dignified, looking very pretty. Indeed, among specimens of this type of beast, she could be considered a "beauty" perhaps.

Praised so strongly by the girl who was her convenantee, the white beast raised her head proudly, her solemn face brightening up.

Part 2

'In the early hours before dawn, the JMSDF exterminated a group of Raptors.

'But one of them escaped at the time and allegedly went north from Tokyo Bay to apparently lurk in the vicinity of Shin-Kiba. Currently, an evacuation order has been issued to the surrounding area—'

This was publicly announced not long after Soth's occupation of the Mansion was confirmed.

Due to the "rule" of concealing information regarding elite dragons as much as possible, New Town's administration had fabricated this cover story.

Thanks to that, Shin-Kiba's redevelopment zone became deserted.

The sun had already set and the night sky was black.

Asya was driving a military jeep, heading to the Mansion alone.

Soth's curse had spread throughout this area. Commoners would simply die for nothing if they stepped foot into here because they were not witches.

Hence, Asya had no choice but to take action alone.

The situation at hand was anxiety inducing. Originally, the plan was to gather all of the few witch-"serpent" pairs in Japan to assemble a team to battle Soth.

Unlike Europe, where the Black Lightning Emperor lurked, or the relatively nearer North America, which was under Red Hannibal's rule, witch-related personnel in Japan had not developed a sense of crisis awareness against elite dragons.

"Were there just a little more time, we could get people from overseas..."

Asya stopped the car and went outside. The air was frighteningly cold.

The cold felt like it would freeze one to the very bones. This was not due to chilling wind but being surrounded by a "Death Curse."

"Rushalka, I'm counting on you," said Asya lightly.

No sooner had she spoken, faint blue light instantly enveloped her body.

She had asked her partner to strengthen the power protecting her. This isolated her completely from the curse, to the point that even the coldness in the air could not be felt.

The sea was nearby.

Asya walked along the shore that was protected by tetrapod breakwaters.

A mini-Monolith stood in one corner of the reclaimed land that was reportedly used as a landfill in the past. The leviathan, Minadzuki, was still coiled around it.

But the originally transparent and colorless triangular prism was now bright red like fresh blood—

Dressed in a hooded robe, a half-man half-dragon was waiting next to the mini-Monolith.

Interested parties had tentatively named this form "Draconian." This was probably the form taken by Soth. Asya knew Soth was waiting here because she had heard his call.

"My apologies for calling you here suddenly, girl of the mortal race," the Draconian said.

As expected, it was Soth's voice.

Two hours prior, a voice had reportedly reached the MPD urban rescue force patrolling the immediate vicinity outside the Death Curse and issued an announcement.

'I wish to meet all of your priestesses immediately. If I fail to meet them, I shall descend upon your city at the stroke of dawn to indulge my joy of playing with fire.'

This was why Asya had made her way to face off against Soth without waiting for backup.

"You're welcome. Thanks to you, I was able to personally witness this particular appearance from one of your kind. This is actually my first time seeing an elite dragon away from the front lines."

"Elite... Is that what humans call one of the Zizou such as I?"

Due to Soth's strange reptilian face, it was impossible to tell whether he was smiling or not.

However, there was clearly an element of mirth in his staid voice.

"This is nothing much. I am simply taking this rare chance to make a display of the magic I learned out of boredom a long time ago."

"Frankly speaking, I think it'd be better if you made yourself even more like surface dwellers—more like humans. Given the magic of your kind, turning completely human should be quite easy."

"Of course it is possible, but pray forgive me for noncompliance."

Despite Soth's polite choice of words, his attitude was quite arrogant.

"Dragons pride themselves on not taking on primate form in the first place. Although there exist hybrids as exceptions... At least, it is not the style of I, Raak Al Soth."

"By the way, may I ask why you wanted to see me?" said Asya while smiling fearlessly.

Elite dragons were very strong. Soth's combat power was undoubtedly above that of Rushalka and hers. Even so, Asya still smiled. This was to apply self-suggestion of "victory is mine."

If she admitted defeat in her heart, that would mean the battle had ended before it even started!

"I basically interpret it as receiving a letter of challenge..."

"That would not be wrong. But allow me to elaborate further."

But with leisure and composure, Soth evaded the fighting spirit displayed by Asya.

"Rather than fighting you, I am currently facing an even more meaningful challenge. For this purpose, I must build up my energy. Hence, the *imitation* summoned by you shall serve to lend me some blood."

"That Monolith-like object—Is that your 'power' too?"

"Fufufu, you shall understand immediately. Putting that aside, I shall first enjoy the pleasure of battle!"

Soth's robe suddenly exploded.

A xenomorph suddenly appeared. Despite a humanoid shape, the entire body was covered in dragon scales the color of bronze with a small pair of dorsal wings and a short tail attached to the lower back.

Soth instantly turned from his Draconian form to a gigantic being within the blink of an eye.

The two wings became large, majestic and ominous while the tail extended in length—Within the brief duration of ten-odd seconds, Soth had rapidly turned back into a giant bronze dragon.

However, Asya noticed something.

The scales covering Soth's entire body were severely blackened. A pitiful sight to behold.

It was as though the scales had lost their luster after being scorched by super-high temperature flames.

"*Imitations* they may be, but they do closely resemble female dragons of my race. With your blood, my stone tower will be able to acquire enough splendor. I offer you my thanks for this!"

Soth reached for Minadzuki that was coiled around the blood-red mini-Monolith and violently pulled off the unconscious serpentine dragon's giant body, tossing the leviathan away casually.

Then Soth breathed fire at the blood-red mini-Monolith.

"O blood of a female dragon's, accomplish my revival!"

Bathed in dragon flames, the mini-Monolith exploded. The blast engulfed Soth's massive body as well.

"Goooooooooooooh!"

Devoured by the fiery explosion, Soth roared in pain.

However, the black scorch marks disappeared from his giant body within the blink of an eye and the metallic luster of bronze was gradually restored. His wounds were healed!

"You imprisoned a leviathan for the purpose of this magic?"

"Indeed. I shall also drink blood from your summoned *imitation* as my nourishment!" yelled Soth in the face of the surprised Asya.

A long metallic rod suddenly appeared in his right hand. Elite dragons were not mere beasts. Like humans, they were capable of using dexterous hands to wield tools.

Reportedly, they especially loved to use "magic wands" as aids in controlling magic.

Furthermore, Soth's wand was no ordinary metallic rod. It was a polearm with a blade affixed to one end of the shaft—In other words, a "spear."

Asya looked up resolutely and chanted a song of summoning.

"I pray to the ancient divine seal of purity! Send the transient blue dragon to the ground!"

Blue Rushalka instantly materialized in the night sky.

She was the leviathan in wyvern form, lacking the front limbs corresponding to arms.

"Rushalka, this might be the final time... Fight by my side!"

Kyuahhhhhhhhh!

Rushalka roared in response to Asya's orders.

Starting the battle, Soth flew towards Rushalka, wielding the "spear" in one hand.

At the same time, he launched an attack at Asya to pin her down. Soth cast a glance of magic at the ground, the Evil Eye, a technique allowing magic to be cast with just a look!

Asya instantly jumped back.

A small explosion instantly occurred at her former location.

Soth had mischievously delivered a diversionary attack but Asya evaded by jumping back a number of meters with feline movements. This was possible thanks to swiftly casting Leaping Power Enhancement on herself to augment her physical abilities.

Since Haruomi and Orihime were not present this night, Asya did not have to worry about needing to use Rushalka as a shield.

"Let's make our move too. Full force at maximum speed!" commanded Asya swiftly.

There was nothing to hold her back anymore.

Now was the time for a quick and decisive battle with no holds barred—
Prepared for a last stand, Asya and Rushalka were at peak morale.

This was more than mere idealism because in the world of magic, powerful magic could only arise from strong willpower and conviction!

"Rushalka! Focus your pseudo-divinity on long-range attacks. Fire!"

The wyvern spread her wings wide and soared through the sky.

A magic circle appeared in front of her. The pattern of a pentagram was traced inside the circle, its blue light depicting the ancient seal of purification in the night sky.

A moment later, a large volume of water poured out from the center of the magic circle like a torrential flow.

Eight torrents shaped themselves into serpentine heads with gaping jaws lined with teeth.

In the previous battle, Rushalka had used a large volume of water to make a two-headed serpent. This time, there were eight multi-headed serpents. The eight water serpents all flew with astounding speed.

Then tracing out different trajectories, they attacked Soth with their jaws.

Rushalka had invoked her pseudo-divinity of Water, turning it into a ranged magical attack of the highest potency.

"O Secret Runes of Ruruk Soun!"

Soth chanted briefly, deploying defensive power in an instant.

Several runes appeared before him, signifying Shield in their arrangement. This was the "magic shield" for defending Raak Al Soth.

One after another, the giant water serpents pounced at the elite dragon protected by the shield of secret runes.

It felt like a large waterfall crashing into a plunge pool all at once.

Every water serpent brought with it a frightening amount of water, pressure and super-high speed.

Blocking this intense torrent, the runes of the Shield became severely distorted, almost losing to the water pressure and getting washed apart.

However, Soth pointed the "spear" in his hand at the sky and yelled, "O magic wand, release the beast within me!"

The magical power surrounding Soth suddenly expanded dramatically.

At the same time, the runes guarding Soth also glowed white, allowing him to hold his ground motionlessly, rendering the previous scene of almost submitting to the water serpents' pressure seem like a lie.

"...I knew it."

Rushalka's full-powered attack was blocked, but Asya nodded.

Since the enemy was elite, this outcome was predictable but Asya still insisted on going head to head with brute force.

This was for the sake of using strategy and skill to craftily strike at enemy openings after the contest of strength.

"Rushalka, switch pseudo-divinity to Moon and disappear behind the shadow."

Asya contained her burgeoning fighting spirit and quietly whispered.

—"Pseudo-divinity" referred to the magical affinity of leviathans. Wind pseudo-divinity would allow the use of atmospheric and wind-related spells while Fire pseudo-divinity offered access to flame-type magic. Naturally, Rushalka's affinity was Water.

However, "serpents" often developed a second divinity when covenanting with powerful witches.

Rushalka was the same, holding both pseudo-divinities of Water and Moon as a rare dual-element leviathan.

Switching to Moon divinity, Asya ordered Rushalka to use a new spell.

This pseudo-divinity's base nature was that of faint moonlight, dark nights and disorientation. At Asya's command, Rushalka's figure melded into the dark night and vanished.

"Hmm!?"

Soth was alarmed to see the enemy disappear.

At the same time, the eight water serpents finally disappeared along with the last of their momentum. Having fulfilled their job, the defensive runes gradually vanished, leaving Soth alone in the sky.

In the next instant, Rushalka suddenly appeared behind him.

Using a mystic technique originating from lunar divinity to erase her appearance and presence, Rushalka successfully teleported from darkness to darkness—

Soth had apparently focused too much on the grand contest of strength, thus exposing an opening. While he was reacting a moment too slow, Asya gave permission to attack.

"Rushalka! Bite and sever Soth's throat!"

Kyuahhhhhhhh!

The blue wyvern roared and extended her neck to attack Soth.

Only then did Soth turn his head with a "Hmm!" and sweep his "spear" horizontally in an attempt to intercept. However, Rushalka dodged skillfully to approach his chest, finally biting the elite dragon's body. But due to evading the "spear," her aim deviated slightly.

Rushalka's sharp teeth sank into Soth's left shoulder.

But this was not a problem. So long as the shoulder was ripped off together with the left arm and chest, a severe injury would be inflicted.

"Laser Breath!"

At Asya's directions, a blue-white glow emerged from Rushalka's mouth.

The Fire Breath of dragons had incinerated many human cities. Leviathans, too, were able to discharge similar kinds of attacks from their mouths. However, such attacks required a cooldown of roughly ten minutes between consecutive shots.

Hence, Asya wanted to pour attack power into the enemy's body without reserve.

The instant she saw her partner bite Soth's left shoulder, she ordered the attack.

"Ohhhhhhhh!?"

Struck by the blue-white heat beam at zero range, Soth screamed.

Rushalka instantly released her jaws and pulled back from her target, flying away nimbly.

A large v-shape was gouged out from Soth's left shoulder to his chest with mercury-colored blood spurting from the wound.

Not a critical wound but quite a severe blow at least—but Soth scoffed and sneered.

"A splendid job considering your wounded state. Looks like I have no need to show mercy!"

Right now, Soth's left shoulder was gouged open but the left arm remained barely attached to his body.

Using just his right forearm, he swung the "spear."

"O winged lizards of Jabones, hasten forth to become my sword and my scales of steel!"

He summoned Raptors—lesser dragons.

Dozens of lights descended the overhead starry sky like a meteor shower.

The swarm of Raptors numbered thirty, all flying dragons of a familiar bronze color. The individual strength of Raptors was nothing special, but if one had to handle this many of them while fighting Soth at the same time—

Furthermore, two of the Raptors had separated from the group to fly rapidly towards Rushalka!

At this moment, Asya heard a familiar voice issue orders.

"Akuro-Ou! Eliminate all of them!"

Asya involuntarily cast her gaze in that direction—As expected, it was Juujouji Orihime. Dressed in the uniform of the same high school as Haruomi, she was currently charging here.

Appearing behind her, an infinity symbol was materializing, turning into a quadrupedal beast—

Before Asya's eyes, the white-furred vulpine-lupine leviathan manifested. On her back were nine tails resembling great serpents.

The white nine-tailed fox-wolf responded to her summoner's orders and jumped high into the air.

Moving her limbs casually, she started soaring with just a light kick against the ground.

No longer moving her legs, the flying fox-wolf moved through the air in a straight line like a speeding comet.

Its flight was powerful and rapid beyond compare. The white fox-wolf rushed over to Rushalka's side in less than ten seconds, intercepting the two flying Raptors.

In the next instant, two of the tails on the fox-wolf's back suddenly moved.

The long and thick tails reached towards the Raptors.

Then the ends of the tails struck the lesser dragons in the face like whips, sweeping them away.

Asya realized that those nine tails were weapons!

Upon closer examination, each tail had black fur on the end, with symbols resembling Sanskrit glowing mysteriously at the very tip.

The nine tails apparently served as the white fox-wolf's "horn counterpart."

Struck by the tails, both Raptors' necks were broken and bent.

Apparently killed, the two winged lizards turned into stone and crashed down.

"Hoh—" muttered Soth in the air upon seeing the arrival of an unexpected enemy.

Asya was also staring at Orihime with surprise all over her face. Bringing about the birth of Orihime's "serpent" was supposed to take much more time, but... Why?



"Looks like I made it in the nick of time. Reinforcements are here, Asya-san!"

Meanwhile, Juujouji Orihime was speaking with her naturally cheerful personality.

Part 3

In the sky above the Shin-Kiba redevelopment zone—

Under Soth's command, there were close to thirty Raptors gathered like a flock of birds.

In contrast, Asya and Orihime only had two "serpents."

Rushalka spread her wings wide whereas the wingless fox-wolf hovered lightly through the air using her own peculiar flying powers, thus the two leviathans stood on guard over the witches' heads.

Asya said to the junior witch who had arrived by her side, "Akuro-Ou... Is that her name?"

"Yes. We thought up a number of candidate names together and finally decided on the coolest sounding one."

Orihime showed great liveliness in voice and expression and was quite composed as well.

Of course, she also seemed a little nervous with a slightly stiff expression. But for her first time fighting, this was composure beyond normal standards. Where did her calmness come from?

"Fighting... is probably okay. Although I'm not too sure what to do exactly, that child—Akuro-Ou—will protect me and she even told me to leave everything to her."

"But that 'serpent' is just a newborn!?"

Asya was shocked after hearing her junior's report but understood at the same time.

The protection of a "serpent" was able to defend a witch from fear and uncertainty to a certain extent. However, Orihime should have no more than

one day's experience. Receiving this much protection from a "serpent" required Level 3 power—

Asya chuckled and decided to forget about this question.

The most important thing now was simply the arrival of apparently dependable reinforcements.

"No time to lose. I'm counting on you. Is that okay?"

"Yes. This is my first time so I don't know how much I can help... But no matter what, please do not hold back with directions. I will do my best!"

Orihime voiced her worries honestly but also expressed optimistic sincerity and fervor.

Hearing an Orihime-style response of honesty, Asya nodded and gave directions.

"If possible, please awaken the pseudo-divinity of the 'serpent' to clear out the Raptors. If that's beyond you, allow my Rushalka to—"

"No, it's not a problem. Akuro-Ou is currently all pumped up!"

Staring at the group of Raptors in the air, the two girls discussed.

Asya readily gave a great nod. Orihime had apparently succeeded in synchronizing with her "serpent" to establish a deep emotional bond of partnership.

Next—

Akuro-Ou's nine serpentine tails suddenly started to light on fire at their tips.

A fireball suddenly appeared at the tip of each tail. The blazing flames of red—Unmistakable. Akuro-Ou was a leviathan possessing the pseudo-divinity of Fire!

In the next instant, the nine fireballs suddenly expanded.

Each mass of flame had grown to roughly the same size as Akuro-Ou before flying towards the dozens of Raptors.

They were as fast as shooting stars.

Like trains smashing little lambs that had accidentally wandered onto railways, the nine fireballs advanced, crushing the Raptors in their path.

The crushed Raptors instantly combusted all over, enveloped in flames.

Then burning, they turned into stone and crashed towards the ground.

Those Raptors were all dead. Not satisfied with killing a single Raptor each, the fireballs continued flying in search of their next prey. Displaying the properties of speed, power and auto-homing, this magical attack was perfect beyond impeccable.

Witnessing the scene, Asya said to her partner, "Rushalka! Of course, our opponent is—!"

Kyuahhhhhhhhh!

The blue wyvern responded to Asya's call and started to soar.

Her target was Raak Al Soth, of course. The bronze dragon opened his reptilian mouth and recited an incantation.

"O Secret Runes of Ruruk Soun, present the arrangement of scorching heat!"

Hence, an arrangement of runes representing Fire appeared over Soth's head.

This was magic for increasing the power of flames, but Asya and Rushalka were already prepared.

"Rushalka, switch pseudo-divinity to Water!"

This was Asya's third time to order her partner to use magic tonight.

Things resembling gray dust kept flaking off from the blue wyvern's body.

The breakdown of her body still persisted. Making Rushalka use magic would speed up the collapse, but even so, Asya had no choice!

"Turn yourself into *holy water*!"

"O *imitation*, burn to cinders!"

Rushalka's massive body turned faint blue. Then the instant this blue color turned even fainter, becoming as transparent as pure water, Soth breathed out blue-white flames.

The firepower was on a completely different level compared to the previous night's—

Even Rushalka would not be able to survive a direct hit.

But this time, Rushalka received almost no damage despite taking on the conflagration head on. At most, only a slight portion of her body was vaporized into steam.

"Hmm!?"

Soth muttered then immediately stabbed with his "spear."

This attack also struck Rushalka. The spear's tip penetrated deeply at the location of the heart, but Rushalka still remained completely unharmed.

This was because Rushalka's body had already turned into holy water by the time Soth struck her.

Through the Blessing of Holy Water, the body of the "serpent," composed of scales, flesh and bone, had transmuted into a liquid mass possessing Rushalka's outline.

This was no ordinary liquid but holy water capable of extinguishing evil dragon flames—

Simply stated, Soth's attack had simply plunged the "spear" into water.

No matter how great the force, water would not be destroyed by such an attack.

Once in the form of holy water, Rushalka would not suffer any damage even if Raptors interfered in her duel with Soth. She could simply ignore them.

Also, turning into water did not mean she was unable to attack.

"Rushalka!"

Following Asya's order, Rushalka instantly accelerated.

Still maintaining her holy water form, she pounced at Soth. This was a colliding attack using her body. Using such a large volume of water to strike at super-high speed, the water pressure would be quite powerful.

"Guoh!?"

Unable to invoke the Shield in time as previously, Soth suffered a direct hit and reeled back greatly.

However, this did not seem to have inflicted too much damage. The dragon said nonchalantly, "Fufufufu, you fight quite well for a body on death's door..."

Soth glared viciously at Rushalka who was now transparent after turning into holy water.

Then he swung the "spear" lightly with a whoosh. He already knew that the "spear" was useless as a weapon but used in its original purpose—as a magic wand—that was a separate matter.

"O Secret Runes of Ruruk Soun, claim the invisible hand!"

Five runes appeared above Soth's head and gave off blue light.

This arrangement of symbols were the runes for Telekinesis. Next, the "spear" in Soth's hand released a telekinetic pulse from its tip, surging towards Rushalka like a ripple!

Kyuahhhhhhhhhhh!?

Rushalka was instantly surprised. Having turned liquid, she was not supposed to be affected by physical attacks.

However, a mysterious attractive force was now trying to pull Rushalka's massive body towards Soth! That was why the "serpent" cried out.

"Rushalka!"

Asya instantly issued a command, ordering her partner to accelerate in flight—

Hence, the blue wyvern started to fly in a different direction, still in her holy water state, with speed incomparably faster than before. Like water flowing from a ruptured dam, Rushalka flew.

Fortunately, Asya's partner escaped the telekinetic pulse and regained her freedom.

However, how long could she elude capture?

The runes of Telekinesis continued to flash and glow above Soth's head.

Asya was a Level 5 witch, meaning she could invoke pseudo-divinity five times a day. This usage counter was not going to reset until the following night's arrival.

She had used divinity thrice tonight already. As the covenantee, Asya felt a premonition.

Most likely, during the instant when she used it for the fourth or fifth time, the collapse of Rushalka's body was going to accelerate all at once, resulting in sudden death.

The trump card equivalent to the value of her partner's life—She must absolutely use it at the right moment.

The true critical moment was coming up next. Asya took a deep breath.

Meanwhile, retracing time a little further back—

Hal and Orihime were traveling by car from the Old Tokyo Concession to the vicinity of Shin-Kiba. As a member of SAURU, he was able to pass without any questioning from traffic restrictions. In the distant sky, Rushalka had finally started the battle against Soth.

Then Hal watched as Orihime hurried over to Asya.

(That girl has Akuro-Ou following her. At the risk of sounding like I am praising my own handiwork, the little one is amazing and will not let the priestess die so easily.)

"Even if you say that, I don't really feel it..." replied Hal to Hinokagutsuchi who was simply whispering without showing herself.

As a side note, the name of "Akuro-Ou" was one of the suggestions offered by the dragon ghost.

"By the way, is it really okay for an unfriendly guardian angel like you to be here, making irresponsible comments? But if you really want to help, I don't mind if you serve as a volunteer."

(Do not be ridiculous. Compared to taking care of others, I love myself more.)

"What a great answer, simple and easy to understand. I'll do as I see fit next."

Hinokagutsuchi seemed to behave diligently only during "deals."

Since this type of selfish mindset seemed to fit her style more, Hal could not help but nod.

(But brat... If assistance were required, you could have taken the opportunity to persuade the priestess to become a vassal when you were parting ways earlier, yes?)

"Persuade...?"

(Yes. Or do you mean to say you have not noticed?)

Hal frowned. This self-styled devil was talking in riddles again...

(Fufu. After all, you did witness the instant when such massive magical power was employed for a serpent's birth. To you, this might have been excellent stimulation.)

"Cut the crap. If you just want to talk shop, shut up."

Hal started running. A different direction from Orihime's.

Soth's target was said to be Haruga Haruomi. For this purpose, Soth had used strange magic to create a mini-Monolith and captured Orihime's cousin and her "serpent."

Of course, since Hinokagutsuchi was the one who said it, total veracity was as yet unconfirmed.

Even so, Hal was feeling even more unpleasant than if he had an eel stuck in his throat. Also, if a girl younger than himself were to be sacrificed—

"Asya and Juujouji are fighting so near here. Who knows if the Mansion might get caught up in the destruction at some point..."

Slightly turning his gaze towards the other end of the sky, Hal saw Soth and Rushalka's aerial battle enter his view.

Rushalka had gone as far as to invoke Moon pseudo-divinity. This was truly all-out war and Hal hoped to rescue the girl inside the Mansion before anything unpredictable happened.

Even if he could not fight Soth, this was something he had to accomplish at least—

Finally reaching the Mansion's entrance, Hal exhaled greatly.

"I managed to survive..."

Relief, resignation, surprise. These emotions were mixed in his sighing.

On the way here just now, the air within roughly a kilometer of the Mansion felt extremely cold. His skin also stung as though pricked by needles.

Even though it was clearly spring, it felt as chilly as midwinter in a cold region because of entering the Death Curse's area of effect. Also from time to time, he discovered the cold corpses of SDF and police related personnel.

Nevertheless, Hal still managed to reach the Mansion safely.

Just as the severe chill felt unbearable and he was convinced that he was destined to become a frozen corpse on the roadside, Hal gritted his teeth and thought, *How could I possibly die here just like that?*

Then he immediately stopped feeling the cold air.

His supernatural resilience(?) had apparently triumphed over the elite dragon's magic.

That being said, it was quite a nerve-wracking challenge to sneak into a dangerous place without tangible protection.

(Sigh, brat. Has anyone ever told you that you are a nice guy to a fault despite your twisted personality? Without any guarantee of safety, why do you need to go so far to rescue this girl whom you have never met before—)

"Quiet, just shut up..."

(Fufu, do know that I am praising you. Men need to be a little idiotic in order to be adorable.)

The girl who called herself the devil was chuckling while exaggerating things on purpose.

Hal did have some self-awareness of how misfortune gravitated towards him. Frowning, he entered the Mansion.

Walking inside the building, he took out his pocket watch.

Not his father's memento but another Clockwork Mage.

Hal performed Heat Sensing magic. With the magic of death occupying the indoor environment, objects exceeding a certain temperature were limited. Living humans like Hal, for example.

Holding the chain, he dangled the pocket watch from his hand, advancing through the building in this manner.

There was no reaction on the first and second floors. When he reached the third floor, the watch began to swing nonstop.

It oscillated particularly intensely in front of a certain door. Something with an elevated temperature was apparently inside.

Hal reached for the door handle—The door was not locked. He opened the door.

Inside was a bedroom with a bed, a table and a closet. All household items were expensive without exception. The room was clean without a speck of dust and organized with immaculate attention to detail. For someone like Hal, staying in this kind of room actually felt uncomfortable instead.

This was most likely the personal room belonging to the witch in charge of this Mansion.

Hal made his deduction based on the room's expensive tastes. Then he subconsciously looked at the bed—And jumped in surprise.

"She's really a girl who's like an angel..."

The beautiful girl was so pure and adorable that one could almost mistake her for an angel.

The witch, whose photo Orihime had shown Hal, was lying asleep on the bed.

Part 4

The girl was making light breathing noises through her nose. Hal recalled that her name was something like Shirasaka Hazumi.

She was wearing the uniform of Kogetsu Academy's middle school division. Even when Hal was standing next to the pillow, she still showed no signs of waking up. Hal tried to shake her shoulders hard but there was no response at all.

"Asleep... No, hypnotized?"

Soth had probably cast sleeping magic on her.

Deducing that, Hal reached into his waist bag to search among his "tools of the trade." He planned to confirm the situation by putting on a monocle to obtain magical sight—

However, he stopped before he took it out.

Shirasaka Hazumi was asleep, lying face up. Her entire body was enveloped in faint white light.

This was the glow of magic. Clearly he did not see it earlier, but now he was suddenly able to see the light.

"Magical sight manifested because I wanted to see...?"

There were apparently more secrets to his special constitution. Hal muttered with heartfelt emotion.

"But carrying Sleeping Beauty using pure arm strength seems a bit laborious. If only there was a stretcher somewhere."

The sleeping magic cast by an elite dragon was impossible for someone like Hal to dispel.

But right now, time was at a premium. Even searching the building would be a waste of time. Besides, the beautiful girl before him was petite in stature and looked quite light. Hence, Hal gave up on the thought but just as he intended to carry her on his back—

(Why do you believe that you cannot rouse her from slumber?)

He suddenly heard the whispers of Hinokagutsuchi by his ear.

(As long as you call out, your voice will surely reach the heart of the priestess—the girl of the sacrificial serpent.)

"..."

Hal could come up with many reasons to refute this baseless proposition.

However, he found himself wondering "Is that really true?" while beginning to imagine.

Prompted by Hinokagutsuchi's reminder, Hal sensed it too. Indeed, this did not seem to be difficult—

Hal gazed into the girl's delicate and proper face.

She was someone who shared her life with a "dragon" or its close relative. In that case, surely she must be able to hear his voice.

Because for dragonkind, I am—we are—their natural enemy, a tyrant and a hated existence as well as being the target of their fear, loyalty and betrayal.

Since the girl was listed in the lineage of dragons, there was absolutely no way for her to ignore his call—

Driven by an inexplicable sense of certainty, Hal reached out lightly to touch the girl's face. At the same time, he also reached her heart.

"You... Can you get up?"

The instant he called out, the girl suddenly opened her eyes. Hal hastily withdrew his hand.

Just awoken, the witch stared blankly with her sleepy eyes for quite a while. Then she turned her glazed eyes to the male stranger by the bed and froze for ten-odd seconds.

Then she emitted a brief and sudden scream.

"Kyah."

"Umm, I'm not a suspicious person."

(What are you talking about? You have already sneaked into a young girl's bedroom and peeked at her unseemly state of slumber...)

Hinokagutsuchi's whispers were correct this time.

But stupid as Hal was to overlook this point until now, he tried his best to put on a harmless look and made an overconfident attempt to pretend to be a "reliable older brother," nodding to the witch who was younger than him.

Fortunately, the girl—Shirasaka Hazumi—could not hear Hinokagutsuchi's voice, apparently.

"O-Okay. Sorry, I screamed too loudly. By the way, why am I here...? I remember going to the courtyard, then... I met a transformed dragon."

"Yeah, you were captured by an elite dragon named Soth."

Confronted with Hazumi who seemed to be remembering what happened before she was hypnotized, Hal answered, "I am your cousin Juujouji-san's... acquaintance. My family name is Haruga."

"I've heard about you."

After Hal brought up Orihime's name to ease her worries and earn trust, Hazumi sat up straight in seiza posture.

She was sitting formally on the bed, gazing at her cousin's acquaintance. Feeling such an honest gaze, Hal instantly felt a little timid.

Her eyes were even more vigorous than what the photo showed. Hal felt as though he might get sucked into them involuntarily.

"I heard that you belong to SAURU and you're Orihime-neesama's new friend." She brought up the title that Hal had deliberately avoided.

Hal did not deny it. Somehow, he could not find a reason to deny.

"Juujouji is busy right now, so I came over to check things out."

"I understand now... Excuse me, Haruga-san, may I ask you a question?"

Shirasaka Hazumi seemed like a sheltered classy young lady.

Her choice of words was very polite but the generous tone of voice made her very approachable.

"This building should be quite dangerous for ordinary people to enter, but why are you...?"

The Mansion was still filled with a curse of Death.

Hal's magical sight could see this deadly magic swirling in the air as tiny gorgeous silver scales. As a witch, Hazumi should be able to see the same thing.

However, why was Hal safe and sound? Confronted with this most natural question, Hal replied, "Simply stated, my constitution is a little special."

"A special constitution!?"

"But I just don't have any inclination to use this constitution for secret activities as a masked hero. Since the future is still undecided, I'd like to keep this a secret for now. I'd appreciate it if you could help out with that."

"Oh..."

Since he had no intention of explaining in detail and there was no time either, Hal decided to just gloss over things.

Hazumi tilted her head with an incomprehensible expression but did not question him. Evidently, she was the obedient and reserved type, unlike her cousin.

Feeling fortunate, Hal was about to end this embarrassing conversation when...

"I see, so something this unbelievable actually existed..."

However, Hazumi was murmuring to herself with an impressed expression and kept staring intently at Hal's face.

Her gaze was forceful indeed. Perhaps due to a guilty conscience, Hal was unable to avert his eyes. Then Hazumi suddenly chuckled, surprising him.

"W-What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing much, it's just that I find this quite interesting. Please do explain in detail next time if you don't mind. I will be very glad..." said Hazumi with a faint and staid smile.

Although Orihime was also a girl akin to a "princess," her cousin was no less suited to the same description.

Hazumi's generous honesty and distinctive pace made "a princess who grew up in a sheltered boudoir" an apt description of her. Furthermore, her laughter exhibited both cheerfulness and what could be called *genuine* purity—

Just as Hal could not help but stare, mesmerized...

CRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!

The sound of rupturing was heard from overhead. An explosion nearby had apparently happened.

Hal and Hazumi exchanged a glance then went to the balcony together.

"So many dragons!? And there are two 'serpents'..."

"Those are the leviathans of Juujouji and Asya—my friend! They are currently fighting the elite dragon that captured you. But it seems like they're having a bit of trouble..."

The night sky above the redevelopment zone had turned into a battlefield between dragons and serpents.

The Raptors numbered roughly thirty.

Driving them away was the nine-tailed fox-wolf, Akuro-Ou. Orihime's leviathan was controlling nine giant fireballs while dashing back and forth freely across the night sky at the same time.

As soon as Akuro-Ou caught up to a Raptor, she would attack using her horn counterpart.

Using the nine tails as whips, she inflicted heavy blows on the Raptors' faces and chests. She also used the claws on her four limbs to tear enemies apart and bit them with her wolf-like jaws.

The result was that whenever Akuro-Ou or one of the fireballs moved—

The number of Raptors decreased surely and steadily. The battle was completely one-sided.

The problem lay on the other side where Rushalka the blue wyvern was dueling Soth.

The "serpent" had currently turned her body into holy water, rendering flames and physical attacks ineffective.

But over the head of Soth while he was holding his "spear"—

Five runes were giving off radiant blue light. Was this also due to his special constitution? Hal was able to decipher the runes' nature with just a single look.

"Magic symbols for Telekinesis!"

Soth was currently releasing telekinetic force that could be described as an invisible hand, trying to capture Rushalka.

He was probably trying to stop his opponent from escaping before casting Dispel on the holy water transformation.

"Th-That is magic that only elite dragons can use, isn't it...?"

Nodding in response to Hazumi's question, Hal said, "Yeah. Those are the Secret Runes of Ruruk Soun. Although elites seem to know many different kinds of magic, only these runes are effective against the leviathans and their strong magic resistance."

Finding Hazumi quite unfamiliar with knowledge in this area, Hal decided to explain.

Speaking of which, the incidence of the magic-wielding elite dragons was relatively low in East Asia.

Hence, it was only natural for her not to have crossed paths with such knowledge.

"The runes of Ruruk Soun are on the same level of power as the pseudo-divinity of 'serpents'—but differ in the number of times they can be used. Asya is Level 5, meaning she can invoke divinity five times at most, but those elites seem capable of using runes many more times..."

Then Hal discovered something.

The mini-Monolith, originally standing on the reclaimed land that had turned into a battlefield, had disappeared at some point!

"Oh—Minadzuki!?"

Hazumi cried out, causing Hal to follow her gaze.

The leviathan in the form of a serpentine dragon, Minadzuki, was currently lying in a corner of the reclaimed land. Possibly affected by the Blood Drinking magic that Hinokagutsuchi mentioned, she was unable to move at all.

"Since she's still materialized, she shouldn't be dead yet, right!?"

"Y-Yes, but she has become quite feeble at the moment. I must hurry and release her material form..." said Hazumi with worry as she clasped her hands together before her chest as though in prayer.

Then closing both eyes, she whispered in a gentle voice, "You don't need to suffer any longer... Hurry and escape from here!"

Lying on the ground, several hundred meters away, the serpentine dragon responded to her partner's prayer.

Turning into particles of light, she disappeared from the ground surface. Opening her eyes to confirm Minadzuki's retreat, Hazumi exhaled with relief.

—Once the partner witch issued the order, a leviathan would instantly disappear.

Fearful of that happening, Soth probably placed Hazumi in deep sleep to prevent that.

The reason why she was not killed was because the leviathan would perish once the covenantee died. Also, Soth was uninterested in the lives of witches and the like—

"Was it because that guy wanted to use Minadzuki's *blood*...?" whispered Hal softly.

Soth's target was Rushalka in holy water form, flying all over the place.

But at this moment, the bronze-colored elite dragon suddenly turned his back to the blue wyvern as though he had lost interest in the battle and flew in this direction—towards the Mansion!

I see. Hal realized.

Making the "serpent" disappear was the partner's special right. Then who could have released Hazumi from her unconscious state—?

Minadzuki's disappearance would surely alert Soth to the arrival of his "target." As expected, this acquaintance of a dragon landed in the heart of the Mansion's grounds and stared intently at the balcony.

"D-Dragon...!" gasped Hazumi next to him, shrinking back in fear.

Hal stepped forward to shield her behind him. No, of course he knew clearly that as a witch, Hazumi was a million times stronger than him, but this frail girl was completely different from his inordinately durable childhood friend.

At a time like this, Hal could not possibly hide behind Hazumi's back, right?

While Hal made this decision with slight resignation, Soth spoke to him in excitement, "Rousing the priestess from my coffin of slumber—I knew it was you, Tyrannos."

"Don't decide on your own to address others by weird names..."

"Temporarily it may be, I still wish to express respect towards the wielder of the dragonslaying bow. Although I would have liked to have subjugated those *imitations* to suck their blood dry first—Now that the two participants of the promised rematch are present, delaying the duel on account of entertainment would be too boorish..."

Soth snickered to himself.

"Bathed in the blazing flames ignited from the blood of female dragons, my Heartmetal is currently aroused in excitement. If it is right now, I can even manage to emulate the techniques of dragonbane... Fufu, heaven ordains that I shall become the dragonslayer to challenge you today!"

Kuohhhhhhhhhhhh!

The white fox-wolf roared and flew over. Akuro-Ou.

Taking a closer look, Hal discovered that all the Raptors spread out in the night sky had been destroyed. Scattered on the empty land in this redevelopment zone were the remains of the petrified lesser dragons.

Struck down by Akuro-Ou, they had crashed down at various places.

Like someone who had defeated swarms of foot soldiers and was finally about to slay the general, Akuro-Ou pounced ferociously at Soth from behind.

As agile as a wolf, she attempted to bite Soth's throat.

With the speed of bestial reflexes, Soth swept the "spear" horizontally. The sharp spear tip slashed open Akuro-Ou's flank.

This sent Akuro-Ou's massive body flying away, causing her attack to end in failure.

However, the fox-wolf's fur apparently possessed toughness on the same level as dragon scales. The wound inflicted by the "spear" was not very deep.

Moving so rapidly that she did not seem injured, Akuro-Ou began to fly again.

The sharp lupine eyes displayed the willpower to attack again.

However, the target did not regard her heroic posture as a threat.

"O *imitation*, you are too boorish. I was just starting a revolt by challenging the Tyrannos. This is dragonkind's most noble crusade, so do not interfere!"

Roaring arrogantly, Soth's entire body instantly began to burn.

As a bronze dragon, his giant body was enveloped in white—platinum-colored—flames.

Hal had seen this type of flame before. A few days ago when Hinokagutsuchi had saved Hal in Tokyo Station, these were the same flames that had surrounded her remains.

Part 5

"Asya-san, what is with that dragon!?"

"No idea. This is my first time seeing that kind of phenomenon too!"

In order to chase after Soth who had suddenly flown away, Asya and Orihime broke into a run.

Taking off first, Akuro-Ou had attacked the elite dragon next to the Mansion. After that, Raak Al Soth's entire body had started to burn with platinum-colored flames.

Like steel that had turned white-hot inside a furnace, he hovered into the air in that state.

The magic wand in his hand also burned as well.

"O sacred spirit of the radiant Ruruk Soun in the sky, O rune of runes, confer upon me, Raak Al Soth, the blade of dragonslaying!"

Soth recited a mantra—an incantation. As a result, the magic wand, burning with platinum flames, changed in appearance, turning into *a giant sword*.

With a straight and broad blade, this greatsword was as thick and sturdy as a woodcutter's hatchet, rather unrefined in craftsmanship.

However, ten-odd runes of Ruruk Soun were carved beautifully on the blade, giving off airs like some kind of foreign cultural artwork.

"D-Dragonslaying...?"

Although shocked by Soth's perplexing magic, Asya and Orihime still managed to arrive in the Mansion's vicinity. Orihime instantly yelled, "Akuro-Ou! Can you still use the same magic as just now!?"

Kuohhhhhhhhhhh! The fox-wolf roared vigorously in response.

Orihime seemed to have gotten used to controlling a "serpent." The nine serpentine tails began to ignite at their tips. The pseudo-divinity of Fire was releasing fireballs from each tail.

These fireballs flew towards Soth again, but—

"Ehhhh!?"

Orihime was taken aback by surprise. So was Asya despite her veteran experience.

Soth was confronting the nine flying fireballs without guarding even though he always deployed defensive runes to protect himself against pseudo-divinity attacks in the past.

After the nine fireballs struck Soth directly—Unbelievably, no damage was inflicted on Soth's incandescent body.

Flying leisurely in the air, the bronze dragon's body did not even flinch. From his perspective, Akuro-Ou's magical attack probably felt like a breeze.

"I already said do not interfere."

Raising the *sword* in his hand, Soth pointed the blade at Akuro-Ou.

In that instant, Akuro-Ou halted just as she was about to pounce.

"Akuro-Ou!? Hurry and move! It's fine if you don't attack but at least dodge that sword!"

Orihime called out in worry but her "serpent" did not respond.

Soth flapped his wings open and started to fly, making a beeline towards Akuro-Ou.

"Fufufu. Confronted with the majesty of the dragonslayer, their natural predator, a mere *imitation* cannot possibly resist at all. Your corpse shall fall here."

The incandescent Soth casually made a thrust with the sword.

Akuro-Ou showed no intent to resist, like a traitor who was kneeling before the former master after challenging the king and unfortunately defeated. Orihime yelled, "Akuro-Ou!?"

In addition, Asya was also shocked by a new discovery.

Soth's left shoulder that Rushalka had gouged earlier had fully recovered!

Was this thanks to the incandescence as well? Either way, at this rate, Akuro-Ou was facing certain death!

"Rushalka!"

Asya ordered her partner to charge in the air, still in the form of holy water.

Akuro-Ou was the target. The power of water pressure pushed the white fox-wolf away. This was an emergency measure to make her dodge Soth's sword. In return, Rushalka was pierced by the sword. But being a physical attack after all, it should not pose a problem—

Kyuahhhhhhhhhhhh!

Rushalka's roar sounded like a death cry.

The instant she was pierced by Soth's sword, the blue wyvern easily reverted back from her holy water form to a material body, resulting in a skewered state. At the same time, she screamed with all her might to express the pain.

Could that sword be carrying some kind of divine might, capable of severing even holy water—?

In front of Asya's eyes, the sword was pulled out.

Rushalka's giant body instantly fell to the ground. She no longer had the strength to fly.

Seeing her partner crash down, Asya stared wide-eyed from just one look.

"Asya-sa—!"

"Orihime-san! Can Akuro-Ou still use divinity!?"

Interrupting Orihime's voice that was panicking from shock and guilt, Asya asked her own question.

"Y-Yes. There should be no problem using it one more time..."

"Just as I thought... But this really doesn't seem like a beginner's power."

As expected, Orihime really did possess Level 3 power. Asya nodded greatly.

"Then don't use the final invocation of pseudo-divinity on a direct attack."

"I-I understand. What about your 'serpent,' Asya-san...?"

"Apparently—not dead yet. But using a human analogy, she seems delirious... She won't respond even if I call to her."

The spiritual connection between her and Rushalka was not severed. This proved that her partner was still alive.

But no matter how Asya communicated telepathically, Rushalka still had no response at all. The situation was clearly quite urgent.

Hence, Orihime tensed her face and said slowly, "In that case, Asya-san, I will do my best for a while. I might not last very long but please take this opportunity to confirm her... confirm Rushalka's condition!"

The junior witch's care and consideration was making Asya spin her brain rapidly. She originally intended to give Orihime orders to retreat to the back and provide cover fire.

But if she could make her way to Rushalka's side, it might be possible to bring out her last power and invoke pseudo-divinity.

More importantly—

"Can I... depend on you?"

"Yes. I have Akuro-Ou here so we are the same. Since Rushalka is about to die, you must stay by her side, Asya-san!"

"Thank you!"

Orihime was a resilient girl at heart and would never say anything like being unable to fight alone.

Rating her junior highly on her exceptional maturity, Asya ran as fast as she could at the same time—

Thanks to using Leaping Power Enhancement earlier to improve her agility, Asya could move as fast as a champion Olympic sprinter. Just earlier, she was running normally to accommodate Orihime who was unable to use this magic, but now, Asya was dashing at full speed with all her strength.

Asya ran towards where her partner, the blue wyvern, had fallen.

"Rushalka! Please, respond to my voice!"

When next to Orihime, Asya needed to act calm and composed as the "senior."

But there was no need for that anymore. She called out desperately to her dying partner.

Platinum flames suddenly surrounded Soth.

A spark drifted down from him in the sky. Falling on the balcony, it started to burn.

Hal and Hazumi hastily rushed out of the Mansion. Thanks to Soth's attention getting diverted towards Akuro-Ou, the two of them reached the first-floor entrance safely.

"Was Rushalka taken out!?"

Arriving outside, Hal instantly yelled out.

Seeing the wyvern fall after getting skewered by Soth's sword, Hal clenched his fist tightly. She was his childhood friend's "serpent" and could be considered the "serpent" closest to him in the entire world. Hal never expected to see her perish in this manner—

Thinking about Rushalka, Hal instantly felt anger surge in his heart. Then immediately—

"Eh...?"

Hal suddenly looked up. He seemed to be hearing calls.

It was the sound of an injured beast seeking its partner. But the voice was very feeble, unable to reach the recipient no matter what...

No, wait. Why was Haruga Haruomi able to hear this kind of sound?

However, Hal became even more certain of something.

—Rushalka was still alive. But at this rate, it was only a matter of time. The childhood friend's "serpent" needed more power. Power to resist impending death, power to annihilate the formidable foe named Soth, power to protect the partner who shared her life—

"Excuse me, Haruga-san...?"

Perhaps worrying about her cousin's friend who had fallen silent, Hazumi spoke up.

Hal quietly looked up and said slowly:

"I'm sorry but could you walk on your own from here? Anyway, as long as you go in a direction where you can sense the police and the SDF, it'll be fine."

Probably due to being forced to sleep for a very long time, Hazumi's back and legs were a little weak.

Although she was able to walk by herself, her steps were unsteady. Along the way here, Hal had to support her a number of times.

Hal felt irresponsible for abandoning her in this state, but he had no choice.

He committed himself decisively. The one who needed him most right now was somewhere else.

Staring at Hazumi, Hal was thinking it would be bad if he made her cry. The younger girl nodded lightly. After seeing Hal's serious expression, she seemed able to sympathize.

"I-I understand. Then where are you going, Haruga-san...!?"

"I've got somewhere I need to go. I need to give the devil a bit of help."

Leaving behind the wide-eyed Hazumi, Hal ran as fast as he could.

His destination was the clearing where Rushalka had crashed down, collapsed. Meanwhile, Akuro-Ou was invoking pseudo-divinity in the air.

This time, there was a *mirage* instead of fireballs.

Mirages were supposed to be illusions occurring in hot deserts.

Like images of cities and oases wavering on the far side of scorching sand and hot wind—a mirage projecting Akuro-Ou's image had appeared. And not just one or two.

Filling up the night sky, there were at least two or three hundred mirages of Akuro-Ou.

This huge number of mirages were dashing across the sky individually as though every one of them was the real Akuro-Ou, flying nimbly around Soth with wolf-like agility.

'Akuro-Ou! Don't let him figure out which is the real one or else you'll get taken out in two or three hits!'

Hal could sense Orihime giving directions from somewhere in the distance.

Rather than hearing with his ears, he was sensing her words vaguely.

Hal was the one who had brought Akuro-Ou and Orihime together. It seemed like he might have acquired a spiritual connection of fate to the two of them at the time, hence allowing him to hear.

However—

"O Tyrannos, looks like you are about to unsheathe your weapon at last."

The target that needed to be handled, Soth, ignored the large swarm of mirages and turned his gaze straight towards the ground.

Hal. Right now, whether in dialogue or battle, Soth only directed his attention to Hal, caring for nothing else.

"Then I too shall forge a new weapon. Fufu, my 'dragonslayer' is ultimately just an imitation... But I definitely can't meet my end here!"

Yelling loudly, Soth pointed the "sword" in his hand up high towards the sky.

"O secret ritual of transience, present before me the royal authority of dragonbane once more!"

Then a dramatic change occurred in the ground.

The Raptors that Akuro-Ou had wiped out earlier using pseudo-divinity were completely dead, fallen upon the ground as stone remains. Due to the impact of falling, their bodies were virtually all pulverized.

These remnants of corpses, which could hardly be called remains anymore, suddenly started to burn, enveloped in the same platinum flames as the incandescent Soth!

A large number of corpses, burning with platinum flames, hovered into the sky, flying to Soth's location.

Then the great amount of fine sand, burning with platinum color, instantly transformed.

Seven giant *dragon skulls* were formed—

There was nothing below the heads. Head specimens of giant dragon skeletons, large enough for even Soth to sit on them without problems. Seven of these *dragon skulls* had manifested in Soth's surroundings.

They were like knights or royal guards defending a king or a general!

The seven dragon heads breathed out fire at the same time.

Blue-white flames. The sudden blaze turned the entire night sky blue. Burned by these flames, Akuro-Ou's mirages were blown away and destroyed one after another.

The hundreds of mirages filling up the sky were gradually decreasing in number.

(Turning minions into a dragonslaying force then commanding them as the general? This fellow is good. It is unbelievable how he can imitate the grand techniques of dragonbane so convincingly. It seems he has researched the path of unorthodoxy very seriously.)

Hinokagutsuchi remarked lightly, impressed.

On the other hand, there was a girl who showed no signs of fear throughout. Namely, Orihime.

'Don't just stand there taking blows, Akuro-Ou, you have to move! Get those fakes moving too and run around as hard as you can!'

With almost a hundred of them remaining, Akuro-Ou's mirages started to move rapidly.

Dashing through the air, they flew all over the place. To evade the flames breathed out by the *dragon skulls* under Soth's command, they moved randomly.

During this time, Hal finally arrived at the clearing where his target was.

The blue wyvern was lying on the ground, powerless.

Asya was there too. She was looking at her partner worriedly, looking up to observe the aerial battle every now and then.

"Haruomi... Why did you come here?"

Seeing Hal arrive by her side, Asya was surprised.

One could hardly blame her. After all, this was a "zone of death" that killed commoners as soon as they entered.

"There's no time so I'm omitting the explanation. How's Rushalka?"

"I-I see. Probably—This is the end for her."

Asya's sorrow probably exceeded her surprise. Obediently, she answered Hal's question.

Gazing at Rushalka, Asya's eyes were misty. Although she had prepared herself for this a long time ago, the thought of parting with her partner still made her sad.

However, Asya was Asya after all. Immediately, she said, "For now, I've strengthened my bond with Rushalka temporarily. She can still use divinity twice so I'm going to use them together to snipe Soth before she passes away..."

Asya looked into the sky with her slightly moist eyes.

Leading the seven dragon heads, the elite dragon was rampaging without regard for the "serpent" at all. However, Soth was absurdly strong right now and could do whatever he wanted.

Then Hal understood Asya's intent.

She planned to use the two remaining magical attacks of pseudo-divinity simultaneously. Dual invocation of divinity was known as Double Casting. Although extremely difficult to control, it was said to be absurdly powerful.

If Asya was the one doing it, she very well might succeed.

But that required her partner to be in a perfect state of health—Hal said, "This won't do. Even if you go ahead, it might not be enough to defeat Soth."

"Eh?"

"That guy seems to be stronger than all the dragons that we know. He could very well be a match for the Caesars—those on the level of dragon kings."

Caesar Draconis, in other words, a dragon king.

These were publicly recognized powerhouses such as Red Hannibal or the Black Lightning Emperor. It was said that just one of these monsters could single-handedly wipe out humanity from the surface of the planet.

After saying this, Hal felt a greater sense of acknowledgement.

In fact, Soth had mentioned the same as well. Dragon king. Perhaps Hal's special constitution was closely related to those super lifeforms and conquerors. But right now—

"Asya, do you want to beat up that guy together with me... Beat up that bastard Soth? Rushalka needs 'power.' And I need power from the two of you too!"

"H-Haruomi?"

"No matter what, I need Rushalka and you... Asya!"

Although Hal talked about helping out, he had no intention of carrying out a "diabolical" deal.

Hence, Hal admitted his thoughts without reserve as a non sequitur and extended his hand towards Asya—However, Asya's reaction to his proposal was unexpectedly dramatic.

"Y-You mean you want me... You want to claim everything of mine as your own?"

"Not everything. Rather, I hope you'll give me what's the most important."

"H-Haruomi! Please don't joke around in this kind of emergency. Y-You need to pick the right timing and location for this type of confession. No common sense at all. You're such a big jerk!"

Asya suddenly closed in.

Clenching her tiny fist hard, she looked like she was about to pummel Hal's head viciously. Speaking of which, during fights in their childhood, her fists always moved even faster than her mouth.

However, the childhood friend opened her fist and held Hal's hand tightly.

"I-If we get back safely, I will carefully consider the request you just made. Let's put it on hold for now. I-I will cherish it in the depths of my heart..."

Blushing red, Asya turned her gaze away while speaking softly.

Verbally, she was passively refusing. But Hal was certain that Asya had accepted. Although the reason was unknown, that was her wish.

Just like the time when he had "reached Hazumi's heart"...

Hal was able to connect to the minds of those listed in the lineages of dragons!

'—Akuro-Ou!?'

Hal heard Orihime yelling somewhere.

Looking up, he saw the sky completely covered by the blue-white flames discharged by Soth's faction.

The great amount of flames was rampaging unchecked, making it almost impossible to see the darkness of the night sky and the light of the stars. The white fox-wolf descended to the ground from this patch of ominous sky.

Rather than crashing down uncontrollably, Akuro-Ou was still flying, albeit slowly.

Reaching the ground, she landed stiffly before collapsing. Hit by the flames just now, she was still heavily injured even though she did not die.

"Just as you can see! I am ready to start any time!"

Leading the seven dragon heads, Soth challenged from the sky.

Having exterminated the interlopers, he intended to press on the attack. Hal nodded.

"Sorry, because there's no time, let me do it directly!"

"Eh, Haruomi!? —What is this power!?"

Hal embraced Asya in his bosom. This was to get a deeper experience of the bond connecting him with Asya.

Her body, as delicate as a fairy's, felt even softer and warmer than imagined. Held in Hal's arms, Asya changed her expression in alarm.

"Magical power! Haruomi, why are you able to—"

A massive amount of magical power was surging from Hal's scorching right hand.

Hal did not need to look. That particular rune was probably manifesting in his palm. While Hal and Asya were embracing each other, rays of light traced out a familiar rune underfoot.

The magical symbol of Ruruk Soun, the Rune of the Bow.

Instantly, Asya tensed her expression. The rune underfoot constructed a "magical bond" between itself and her, the same kind of bond as between a witch and a leviathan—

This spiritual union allowed Asya to understand Hal's intent.

Shoot Soth down. For this purpose, pour this *power* into Rushalka and seize victory!

"I'm counting on you, Asya!"

"V-Very well. Let's stand up together again, Rushalka!"

Despite some hesitation, Asya still issued the order.

Immediately, Rushalka's giant body, limp and powerless, began to burn. With platinum flames. The same flames as what Soth controlled and what Hal had used a few days ago.

While becoming white hot like steel that had been thrown into a furnace, Rushalka lifted her body at the same time—

Slowly, she spread her blue wings and started flying in the sky towards the heights where Soth was waiting with the seven dragon heads under his command.

As soon as Rushalka took flight, the platinum flames instantly vanished from her body.

However, her flying was vigorous and powerful and did not seem affected by her injuries at all.

"Fufufufu. I have grown impatient, Tyrannos. Now is the moment for the decisive battle!"

Soth and Rushalka clashed in midair again.

However, the elite dragon was speaking to Hal who was on the ground. As for the willpower residing in Rushalka, wanting to defeat dragonkind, that came from Hal.

(Indeed. The technique of dragonbane allowing one's followers to become "dragonlayers"... The magic of Soth's ilk is merely an imitation after all. Confirm with your own hands the true power I have entrusted to you!)

Hinokagutuschi goaded Hal by the side of his ear.

(Now issue orders to your rune, the Bow Star of the Southern Sky, to fire the dragonslaying bow!)

Bow Star of the Southern Sky. That seemed to be an unexpectedly majestic name.

Embracing Asya with his left arm, Hal pushed his other hand forward.

Compared to last time, Hal understood more clearly the method of usage. Aiming the Rune of the Bow, carved on his right palm, towards Soth in the sky, he prayed silently for Rushalka who served as the medium.

—Using this rune, perform the magic of the Bow.

Instantly, the Rune of the Bow also appeared in front of Rushalka as she flew through the air.

The size was almost as large as the leviathan's body. This was proof that the enchanted armament of the "dragonslaying bow" had conferred magical power to the blue wyvern's body and soul.

"Fire!"

"Rushalka! Frost Breath!"

While Hal gave his command, Asya also issued an order at the same time.

The blue wyvern released an attack from her mouth.

Cold breath for freezing everything in its path—that was the dragonslaying arrow shot by the Bow this time.

"Magic for increasing the shooting ability of dragons obeying the master huh..."

Hal muttered in his mouth.

What Hinokagutsuchi called the Bow was just a concept after all.

Simply stated, its true form was combining a supreme Ruruk Soun rune with either a dragon's overwhelming magical power or a leviathan's pseudo-divinity, thereby launching magic to annihilate dragons—

While Hal was finally understanding this, the freezing breath flew, tearing through the air.

Intercepting it were the blue-white flames expelled simultaneously by the seven dragon heads.

"O false king, suffer my flames of rebellion!"

The cold air exhaled by Rushalka collided head on with the flames from Soth's faction.

The two attacks not only aimed for their opponents' lives but also expanded to engulf the entire sky in the area.

The blue-white flames exhaled by the seven dragon heads turned into torrential flows, scorching the night sky of spring.

The cold air released by Rushalka was mixed with countless shards of ice, blowing as fiercely as a blizzard, mercilessly freezing the air above Shin-Kiba, recreating the kind of sky situated above permafrost.

Fiery hot air and freezing cold air were irreconcilable.

Vying for supremacy, the hot and cold air clashed with each other. Holding onto Hal for support and leaning tightly against him, Asya gripped hard as though trying to suppress her unease.

At first glance, the two sides seemed equally matched in power.

(This brat named Soth definitely studied the path of unorthodoxy diligently.)

Hinokagutuschi sneered lightly.

(But ultimately, it is mimicry of limited knowledge without the possession of flint. Although this side is an *imitation* as well... Thinking that an attack of this level could destroy the Bow would be truly underestimating the Bow's force of will!)

Almost at the same time as the queen's shout, Rushalka finished exhaling her Frost Breath.

However, the attack did not end there. Instead, it was the opposite. Starting from this instant, the exhaled cold air became even stronger. It was no longer something so gentle as to be called a breath—

While Hal and Asya watched the sky above, a *storm* of absolute zero temperature was blowing violently.

Its cold air and wind strength even surpassed the great blizzards blowing across permafrost.



The dragonslaying storm could even extinguish the heat and flames residing within the body of dragons.

"Hmm—!?"

Strong as Soth may be, even he felt greatly shocked because the sudden ice storm instantly wiped out the flames that he and the seven dragon heads had breathed out.

Furthermore, Hal's instincts told him that the Rune of the Bow had yet to exhaust its offensive power.

That being said, using a bow and arrow analogy, the remaining power was probably on the level of a single arrow.

In that case, the best option was—

"Another shot... Aim and fire!"

Responding to orders, Rushalka's "horn counterpart"—the *horn* on her forehead began to release electricity.

Erupting from that point, blue-white lightning streaked across the sky in a straight line, intending to pierce the chest of the incandescent Soth—in other words, the equivalent location for a human's heart!

It was an arrow shot out as though a sky god had taken aim and fired lightning as a projectile.

"Guh...! The Bow-wielding Tyrannos doesn't even have a wand. This Bow is nothing!"

Soth raised the long and broad sword directly in front of him, intending to strike down the arrow of lightning.

Then he deployed before himself dozens of Shield runes—the Secret Runes of Ruruk Soun—with protective functions, establishing a formation of total defense.

However, the arrow of lightning pierced this defense to strike the elite dragon's massive body.

In that very instant, Raak Al Soth was frozen in midair.

Instant death—just as Hal believed with certainty, the storm of cold air rampaging in the sky also devoured the seven skulls that were Soth's minions. The bodies of the dragon master and servants were shredded by the cold air, raging wind and ice shards, disintegrating and scattering within the blink of an eye.

Currently, the only super lifeform remaining in the air was Rushalka.

In the center of the storm, the blue wyvern roared as though boasting of her victory.

Epilogue

Dragons resided on the moon's surface and satellite orbits.

Two thousand years ago, the ancient Greeks called this domain "Hyperborea" or in other words, "the country beyond the North Wind."

In fact, a certain girl was sitting in a corner of the "nest" drifting on a satellite orbit while leaning against a rock face, leisurely looking up at the heavens filled with stars.

The small dragons known as Raptors in the lower realm apparently made their "nests" on what were similar to so-called asteroids.

These small astronomical objects could be considered extremely small asteroids.

...Except that these lumps of rock on satellite orbits were ultimately created from dragonkind's magic rather than providence of the universe.

Currently, the girl was alone in this "nest."

The original inhabitants seemed to have sortied in full force to attack the ground.

From this distant height, she enjoyed the pleasure of watching the stars alone—

"...Bow of the Southern Sky. Is someone using it?"

Vaguely sensing the pulsation of a nostalgic power, she whispered inadvertently.

In her resided the power of dragonbane named the "dragonslaying arrow" and just now, someone had apparently fired the weapon which existed as its pair. It was most likely somewhere on earth.

The bond between the pair of bow and arrow notified her of that fact.

If the power being used had been the Sword or the Spear, she probably would not have sensed it.

"Someone has caught the queen's eye? Or perhaps it was thoroughly plundered...?"

She tried to voice out various possibilities but did not continue to dwell on the matter.

After all, she could find out just by locating the user. The corners of her lips twisted into a grin. After a long while, she was thinking about the ground surface again.

If the Bow's inheritor were someone ordinary without sufficient capacity, then as the master of the Arrow, she shall simply execute the unworthy.

Conversely, if the wielder possessed the capacity to become a hero—then a fight would be nice.

...Just like that time in the past when she had personally sent the queen to her grave.

"If it's that guy, maybe he might know something."

She recalled the old acquaintance who supposedly lived in North America.

He used to frequently show off that Red Whatever nickname the humans had chosen for him. Despite his lofty stature as a *dragon king*, he was a weird fellow who actively sought contact with the lower realm.

"I suppose I shall find that guy to question first."

As fellow dragon kings, even a sudden visit should not cause any problems.

Optimistically thinking to herself, she smiled. It was a smile filled with childishness and ambition, quite fitting for her young face.

For a human, her appearance would be that of fifteen years old or so.

With that form, identical to a *human's*, she was the very image of a dignified maiden.

Worn on her body was what the lower realm called a white one-piece dress. But no matter what, a human could not possibly be hanging out contentedly at

this height, dressed in this manner, even twirling the hem of her dress with full liveliness.

"My minion, bring forth to me the Arrow of Sirius!"

Responding to her call, a shooting star fell from the myriad stars in the heavens above.

In order to deliver her, wingless as she may be, to the vast blue land beneath—

"How could this be even possible? It's totally unbelievable...!"

"Oh well, both of us were too careless on this issue. Can't be helped."

Hal responded indifferently to the sighing Orihime.

"But Haruga-kun, this nonsense about me making a packed lunch for you every day, also engaged as your fiancée, even to the point of taking charge of all your domestic affairs...! These completely unfounded rumors have spread throughout the school!?"

"Juujouji, those rumors actually have some basis behind them."

It was Saturday morning in the living room of the Haruga residence.

The master of the house, Hal, was sitting in an armchair.

Orihime was seated over on the sofa. As a side note, the living room's former state of pandemonium was now neatly organized and thoroughly cleaned.

This was all accomplished by the slightly airheaded classmate currently in front of Hal.

For the last few days, Orihime had visited the Haruga residence diligently, dedicating herself to cleaning and tidying with great focus.

"B-But I only gave you a lunchbox on that one occasion..."

"Yes. But looking back now, receiving it in front of everyone in the class was definitely a fatal mistake... Because we left school early that time, it even developed into a soap opera plot of our abortive attempt to elope."

"Ugh."

"Besides, if you hate these rumors, just don't visit this house."

Hal proposed a simple solution that addressed the root.

But Orihime readily rejected it.

"That doesn't matter, actually. Anyway, after a minimum level of cleaning and tidying, I've cleared out a place to stand at least. I will bring Hazumi along next time. As long as we're not spending time together alone, weird rumors won't spread, right?"

"...Uh, is that mage girl coming here too? For real?"

"Yes, because Hazumi also feels fascinated by you, Haruga-kun. This is perfect."

After the battle with Soth, Shirasaka Hazumi first went to a hospital to get examined.

However, Hal had heard that there were no abnormal symptoms with her health and she was safely discharged. There was no real reason for her to come here, so bringing her was pointless, right?

Still, Hal shelved his doubts for now and first confirmed the matter which concerned him.

"Her 'serpent,' Minadzuki, how is she?"

"Not too good, apparently. Being treated as a live sacrifice seems to have caused severe harm so recovery has been very slow. She needs to rest as much as possible to recuperate properly," said Orihime with worry.

Fortunately, Akuro-Ou was steadily recovering after getting struck down by Soth. Given just one or two weeks of time, the durable bodies of "serpents" were able to heal from injuries, even very serious ones.

In other words, this also proved that Minadzuki had suffered extraordinary damage...

"Speaking of injuries, how is Asya-san's 'serpent'?"

"She seems a lot better than before. I'm not sure if it's an effect of *that power* but after defeating Soth, she recovered to a slightly healthier state than being on the verge of death."

Rushalka was originally expected to exhaust her strength and die during the final battle against Soth.

Although her current condition could not be considered good, at least her life was out of danger.

Furthermore, Hal had reported to Hiiragi and Kenjou that the victory was due to Asya and Rushalka's dormant power.

After all, including Hal himself who was in the middle of it all, no one could explain clearly what had happened.

To avoid trouble, muddling through with a random lie was the best course of action. However, Hal still explained to Orihime and Asya, who had participated in the battle against Soth, everything from the start since his first encounter with Hinokagutsuchi.

As a side note, the girl who took on the fire god's name and called herself the devil had not appeared for quite a while—

"Still, you should get yourself examined or tested, Haruga-kun, to see how out of ordinary your body has become. This feels so much like those masked characters in American comics. It's very interesting and exciting."

"No, I'm not Spiderman. Neither did I come from the planet Krypton," retorted Hal indifferently to Orihime's giggling.

Putting aside whether it was good or bad, being able to joke around with this matter could probably be considered adaptability exclusive to the generation born after dragonkind's return.

"By the way, Haruga-kun, how about checking out the UFO Research Club next time? Since we are nominally members, after all, and Mutou-san already invited us."

"But... Although it might sound a bit much to say this, no good can come out of professionals like us showing up at an amateur research club. For either side."

"Don't worry. It's just a high school club activity. You don't have to be so concerned."

Orihime swiftly refuted Hal's reason for not wanting to go.

"Stop scrounging for excuses. You're supposed to say yes immediately to a friend's invitation. After all, for a lazy guy like you who avoids social interactions, Haruga-kun, invitations must be hard to come by, so it'll work out just right if you accept every last one of them."

Orihime's way of putting things was totally tyrannical.

Nevertheless, given Hal's abilities in reading people's words and behavior, he could at least tell that her attitude stemmed from a kind of care and consideration. But to be honest, Hal was very afraid of meddlesome people like her.

Juujouji Orihime was definitely someone to avoid after all.

Hal's old plan to retreat from Tokyo surfaced in his mind again.

However, issues such as Asya, Hinokagutsuchi as well as his ridiculous body were all popping in and out of his thoughts—

Hal looked again at Orihime's face that was cheerful as usual.

She responded with an innocent smile. Influenced by her, Hal said reflexively, "...Is that so?"

"Yes, indeed. Then let's visit within the next few days."

Just as Hal was about to relent and agree, he received a call on his cellphone.

It was Asya. He instantly picked up.

'Oh Haruomi, I'm going to drop by later. I've got something to show you. Also, what happened earlier needs to be redone all over again...'

"All over again?"

'Didn't I say I was going to cook lunch to prove my femininity? After shopping and getting things ready, I'm heading over to your house, Haruomi.'

"What a coincidence. Just like last time, Juujouji happens to be here too."

'Eh...!?'

Hal heard a gasp on the other side of the line.

'U-Umm, Haruomi, don't get the wrong idea, okay? The reason why Orihime-san is taking care of you, Haruomi, and even cleaning up your house is because she is extremely friendly and slightly airheaded. Things like seeing you as a boy or wanting to attract your attention—There isn't even one billionth of a chance of that, absolutely don't misunderstand no matter what!'

"Like anyone would be stupid enough to misunderstand that!"

'That better be the case... Oh right. I'm going to impose on your hospitality straight away.'

"Don't you need to go shopping first?"

'You can take care of that yourself, Haruomi. The maiden in my heart is currently screaming out that you two cannot be left in isolation any longer no matter what!'

The call was hung up right there.

Asya was apparently feeling the wildness inside her body warning her with some kind of alarm. What exactly was she taking precautions against?

"Was that Asya-san calling? Is she coming over later by any chance?"

Meanwhile, listening to the conversation on the side, Orihime was smiling cheerfully while she spoke.

Clunk. The sound of entry from the front door. Pitter patter. Then came the sound of frantic footsteps.

"Th-Thanks for waiting!"

Hal did not expect Asya to just barge into the living room like that.

During the phone call just now, Asya seemed to be in the neighborhood. Then seeing her attire, Hal and Orihime both stared wide-eyed.

"I've decided to transfer into your school. As comrades studying in the same school, let's take care of one another from now on!"

Panting heavily while she spoke, Asya was dressed in Kogetsu Academy's uniform.

The girl, who originally used her position as witch to escape Hal's fate of being bound by age to attend high school, was now making an unexpected declaration of school enrollment.



What had compelled Asya to do this? Even as her childhood friend, Hal was baffled.

But for some reason, he could imagine how ordinary methods were absolutely not going to work in handling his school life from this point onwards.

Afterword

Hello everyone, nice to meet you. I am Takedzuki Jou.

Thanks to MF Bunko J this time, I was able to publish this book. Truly a cause for celebration.

If "hello again" applies to some of you, dear readers, instead of "nice to meet you," then I am truly grateful. The reason why I can squeeze into the edges of this industry and continue working is all thanks to the loving support of every reader. For this I express my utmost thanks.

Reaching this point took quite a convoluted turn of hardships.

Most prominent of all was the story content. In the beginning, I said "I'd like to try writing a fantasy work about parallel worlds" just to test the waters, but the editorial side vetoed it, saying "too many people are writing about this subject."

"Then how about a romantic comedy or a heartwarming slice-of-life?"

"What are you talking about? Just continue as usual with those battle stories."

"I'm already writing that type of series elsewhere, one that drains massive energy from the body and mind, so I was thinking I'd like to try to challenge the cliched routes of the light novel industry and write a pure moe-style novel."

"Can't you show off your vast knowledge of gods and mythology?"

"The market only needs one series of that type, right?"

"Don't be like that. Anyway, just write a battle story that takes place all over the world."

After an intense debate, the story concept was finally determined.

No, apart from this one point, I am truly grateful for the great freedom afforded in my writing environment. But to think that I could do whatever I wanted during the writing process, this actually makes me a little worried (wry smile).

Next up, I'd like to acknowledge the assistance I've received from many people again.

First comes the editing, designing, proofreading and production etc. I hereby thank everyone who dutifully dedicated their efforts in the process of turning this story into a book.

Especially Nimura-sama the illustrator, because I caused a lot of trouble for you with my slow writing speed and repeated modifications to the original draft.

I am truly thankful to you for adding to this book's visual effects. With so many miraculous colored sketches whose quality were enough to be published directly when all you needed to do was make a quick sketch, you really helped me a lot in the process of conceptualizing characters and fantasy creatures.

Then there is Kimura Kou-sensei who prompted me to come up with this story's concept.

Thanks to you, I finally actualized my wish to join this brand and become your junior. Please continue to edify me with your guidance.

As a side note, this story has essentially two main heroines.

While stuck in dilemma to determine who is the number one heroine, as the author, I once suggested "it must be Orihime, I guess. After all, her femininity is so high."

"Recently there's a new trend in the industry to let the girl who lacks femininity to become the main heroine."

But after hearing that from the editor in charge, I finally slapped my thigh in enlightenment. Hence, the "dual heroine" format was officially decided and a certain girl was honored with the cover of Volume 1.

But losing out in the area of feminine charm, she will definitely face tough trials ahead of her.

Will she be unable to turn the tides? Or is her dormant potential about to awaken? Or perhaps a third main heroine will arrive, further backing her into a corner? None of this can be known.

If possible, please confirm for yourself in the next volume.

Illustrator's Afterword

Oh my goodness, Takedzuki-sensei's new series is beginning, my dear wife.

Although I know that Sensei has written other interesting series, I'm really curious whether this *Covenant* series will be able to continue as an equal match...

Nimura Yuji

Hazumi-san ...Expected to be kind of like this?

あらやだ、丈月センセの新シリーズが始まっちゃいましたよ奥さま

他で面白い作品を書かれていらっしゃることは存じていましたが、
この『盟約』も負けず劣らず続きが気になりますのぉ…

Nimura Yuji.

羽純さん

こんな感じになる…予定？

